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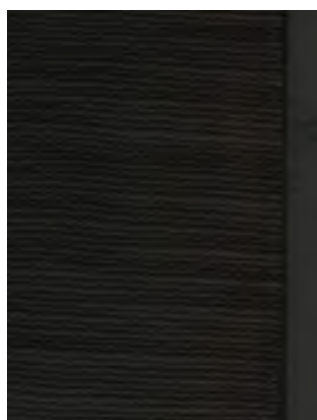
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THE HEART OF A MYSTERY

THE HEART OF A MYSTERY

A Novel

BY

T. W. SPEIGHT

AUTHOR OF

"HOODWINKED," "BACK TO LIFE," "BURGO'S ROMANCE,"
ETC., ETC.

"Pluck out the Heart of my Mystery."—HAMLET.

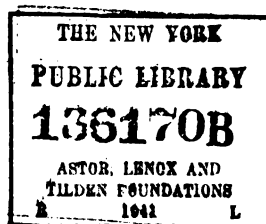
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The Heart of a Mystery

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CONTENTS.

THE PROLOGUE.

Chapter	Page
I. In December Weather	7
II. The Pengarvons of Broome	14

THE STORY.

I. Mr. Hazeldine Changes his Notes for Gold	23
II. "Farewell, a Long Farewell"	31
III. Tea, Talk, and Music	39
IV. A Laggard in Love	47
V. Ephraim Judd Cuts his Hand	55
VI. The Discovery	62
VII. Who Did It?	71
VIII. Mr. Hazeldine's Letter	79
IX. The Inquest	87
X. An Anxious Week	95
XI. The Verdict	102
XII. Amo, Amas	110
XIII. The Trial	117
XIV. Exit Miss Letitia	125
XV. After the Trial	133
XVI. A Letter and its Reply	141

- XXII. Ephraim Judd's Strange Expe
- XXIII. Poor John!
- XXIV. Enter Mr. Hodgson . . .
- XXV. Ephraim Judd's Remorse .
- XXVI. The Brothers
- XXVII. Wrong Versus Right . . .
- XXVIII. Victory
- XXIX. Mixed Threads
- XXX. The Downward Path.—A Propo
- XXXI. Clement's Quest
- XXXII. Correspondence
- XXXIII. The Quest Continued . . .
- XXXIV. Another Link
- XXXV. The Widow Varrel . . .
- XXXVI. A Journey of Discovery. . .
- XXXVII. How and Why
- XXXVIII. The Cloud Dispersed, and a
Disappointment
- XXXIX. An Interview and its Sequel
- XL. A Story of the Past, and a Depa
- XLI. "Good-Bye to One and All "



THE HEART OF A MYSTERY.

PROLOGUE.

CHAPTER I.

IN DECEMBER WEATHER.

On a certain bitter December evening, when the present century was several years younger than it is now, Miss Pengarvon, of Broome, in the shire of Derby, sat in the Green Parlor at the Hall, working by candle-light at some piece of delicate embroidery. The fingers of the old case-clock pointed to half-past ten—an exceptionally late hour in that remote place. Miss Pengarvon was alone. Her sister, Miss Letitia, had been suffering from neuralgic pains in the head, and had retired an hour ago. Barney Dale, the major-domo and, in point of fact, the only male member of the establishment, together with his wife, had gone into the village to visit a sick relative, and there was no knowing at what hour they might return. The solitary housemaid, having nothing to sit up for, had been glad to exchange the chilly gloom of the huge flagged kitchen for the comfort and warmth of bed. Earlier in the evening snow had fallen to the depth of two or three inches, but the sky was clear again by this time and the stars were glittering frostily. Except for the ticking of the clock and the occasional dropping of a cinder, silence the most profound reigned inside the Hall and out. Now and then Miss Pengar-

von's needle would come to a stand for a moment while she snuffed the candles, after which the monotonous stitching would go on as before. Be it observed that candlesticks, tray, and snuffers were all of silver, although the candles themselves were of a cheap and common kind.

Miss Pengarvon was desirous of completing the work on which she was engaged before going to bed. Both she and Miss Letitia were remarkably skillful with their needles, and, gentlewomen though they were, were not above seeking payment for their work. But this was a secret known to themselves and Barney Dale alone. Once a month Barney went over to a certain town some score miles away, where he found a ready market for the proceeds of the untiring industry of the two ladies at the Hall, without anybody being the wiser as to whose handiwork it was. The money thus earned formed a welcome addition to the very limited income of Miss Pengarvon and her sister.

At this time Miss Pengarvon was close on her forty-fifth birthday. She was very tall, and grim, and gaunt. The normal expression of her features was harsh and forbidding. She had fine teeth, an aquiline nose, and unsympathetic blue-grey eyes, with a cold, stony gleam in them, deeply set under bushy brows—eyes which looked as though they had never melted with tenderness or softened with tears. The mass of her dark-brown hair, which began to show signs of the flight of time, was coiled round the crown of her head and held in its place by a high comb, while three small puffs or curls, which were generally kept in paper till mid-day, decorated each side of her forehead. When not engaged with her needle, she wore black lace mittens, and she always changed her morning dress of black bombazine for one of black silk before dinner. The dress she was wearing had been both dyed and turned, but was still good for two or three years' longer wear.

Of Miss Letitia it is enough to say that she was a

copy, in somewhat less pronounced colors, of her sister as far as one human being can be a copy of any other ; indeed, by comparative strangers, she was not infrequently mistaken for Miss Pengarvon. She was two years younger than her sister, whose stronger will dominated hers, and who had still as complete an ascendancy over her as when they had been children together. It was noticeable that if any of the servants, or any poor person, wanted a favor granted, or a kindness done them, they went by preference to Miss Letitia rather than to Miss Barbara.

The Green Parlor, although it was traditionally supposed to be haunted, was the favorite sitting-room of the Misses Pengarvon, as it had been of their mother in her time. It was probably owing to the force of early associations that they clung to it as they did, seeing that there were many pleasanter rooms in the old house, some of them looking over the terrace and the garden beyond, or having views across miles of swelling moorland ; whereas the two high, narrow windows of the Green Parlor looked into nothing more attractive than a small shaven lawn, shut in by a thick semicircular hedge of evergreens, and without any embellishment beyond such as might be afforded by a dilapidated and moss-grown sun-dial.

Both fingers and eyes were tired, but Miss Pengarvon went on doggedly with her work. She finished her task as the clock was striking eleven. With a sigh of relief she rose from her chair, and began to put away her silks and needles and other materials. While thus engaged she started suddenly ; she felt nearly sure that she had heard a knocking at the front door. She waited without stirring for a couple of minutes. Yes, there it was again—the unmistakable sound of some one knocking at the great door of the Hall. Who could be seeking admittance at that late hour ? The visitors at the Hall were so few that Miss Pengarvon was utterly nonplussed, Barney Dale and his wife, when they should

return, would gain admittance through the back premises, of which they had the key. There might be thieves or tramps abroad, who knew that there was no one but women in the house.

But Miss Pengarvon was a woman of nerve, and not readily frightened. She was still waiting and hesitating when the knocking sounded for the third time, but less loudly than before. At the best it had been a timorous and half-hearted sort of summons, with little or no self-assertion about it.

Miss Pengarvon hesitated no longer. Taking up one of the two candlesticks, for there was no light in any other part of the house, she flung open the door of the Green Parlor and passed into the dark corridor beyond, shading the candle with her hand as she went. From the corridor she passed into the entrance-hall, strange, weird shadows seeming to start into life from wall and ceiling, as though they had been suddenly disturbed in their sleep, as she crossed it with her feeble light. Before her was the great door, iron clamped, and fastened with bolt and chain. Putting down her candle on a side table, Miss Pengarvon went up to the door and laid her hand on one of the bolts. Then she hesitated. She knew not who might be outside, and she was but one lonely woman. Then with a gesture of impatience at her own timidity, she undid the heavy bolts and locks one by one, but was careful to leave the guard chain still up. Then she pulled open the door as far as the chain would allow. A gust of frosty air, that cut almost like a knife, leaped suddenly in, bringing with it a shower of powdered snow and extinguishing the candle.

Miss Pengarvon, peering out into the snowy night, saw a female figure, hooded and cloaked from head to foot, standing on the topmost of the broad, shallow flight of steps which led up to the door. As she looked a dire presentiment shook her from head to foot, as few things else in the world could have shaken her, but her voice was clear and stern when she spoke :

"Who are you, and what is your business here at this untimely hour?" she demanded.

The figure outside came a step nearer.

"I am Isabel—your sister," was uttered in broken accents. "I have been walking till I can walk no longer. I have not tasted food since morning. I want shelter and rest for to-night—only for to-night."

The tone was one of pitiful supplication.

"Neither shelter nor rest is there under this roof for such as you," replied Miss Pengarvon, in her stoniest accents. "You have disgraced the name you bear as it was never disgraced before. This is your home no longer. Go!" and without another word the great door was shut with a crash and the bolts and locks shot one by one.

As Miss Pengarvon put out her hand in the dark to find the candlestick, one short, sharp, anguished cry—the cry of a broken heart—smote her ears. She stood for some moments with a hand pressed to her bosom, listening, but the silence was not broken again. Once more the house seemed a house of the dead. Then Miss Pengarvon turned and made her way through the black entrance-hall and the blacker corridor beyond, till she reached the parlor. Going in, she shut the door and tried to re-light the candle, but her hand trembled so that for some time she could not. Her face looked strangely haggard, but the hard, cold look in her eyes never varied. She drew a knitted shawl round her shoulders and sat down by the smouldering embers. Surely Barney and his wife could not be long now! She felt a strange disinclination for going to bed till they should return, although under ordinary circumstances she would have had no hesitation about doing so. The wind was beginning to rise, and every now and again there were eerie moanings in the wide chimney, while the windows shook and rattled as though some one were trying them from without. There was only one candle alight, and the room seemed full of shadows

not even when a child, and she despise feeling. All this time she was conscio still listening intently. Would that tin at the door make itself heard again? hoped that it might. She kept tellin and again that it was impossible for he otherwise than as she had acted, that ; was open to her—and yet she listened f to come again. By-and-bye she opened way. This, as she told herself, was only be enabled to hear Barney when he How slowly the minutes passed! What the wind made! Those windows must b morning and made to fit more tightly i It was evident that she would not be tro knocking again. “So much the better better,” she muttered under her breatl was listening all the time. Thank Hea Barney Dale at last.

She could hear him unlocking one of of which he had taken the key with him not re-lock the door, which was strang was coming at a great pace in the directi Barney had believed.

Miss Pengarvon's tall, thin form drew itself up to its fullest height. "I know it," she said in her deep, harsh tones; "I know it. Let her lie there, or let her go. There is no home for such as she."

"But, mistress, she's dying; or, mebbe, dead already—dead and cold. I lifted up her head, and it fell back like a lump o' lead. You munna leave her lying there to perish. For heaven's sake, mistress, let me and Joanna see to her!"

"Let her go. This is no home for such as she," was all that Miss Pengarvon said.

"But she canna even stand, and, long afore morning, she'll be froze to death. Besides, which——" he bent forward, and whispered a few words in Miss Pengarvon's ear.

A sort of stony horror came into her face as she listened. Then she drew back a pace and clenched her hand, and for a moment Barney thought that she was about to strike him. "It is a lie—an infamous lie!" she whispered back through her thin, dry lips.

"It's gospel truth, mistress, and Joanna will tell you the same. You munna leave her lying there, dead an' cold, poor dear—dead an' cold."

"So be it," said Miss Pengarvon, after a few moments, with an evident effort. "Do you and Joanna bring her in—but not by the front door, not over the threshold she has disgraced. Let her come in by the door at which beggars and vagrants knock."

Barney waited for no further permission, but went at once, closing the door behind him. Miss Pengarvon folded her shawl more closely around her and sank into a chair. She sat and stared at the dying embers, her thin lips moving, but no sound coming from them. All the same, her ears were painfully on the alert. She started as though she half expected to see a ghost, when the door slowly opened, and Miss Letitia entered the room in her grey dressing-robe and frilled night-cap.

The latter was trembling violently, and her eyes were full of terror.

"What brings you here?" demanded the elder sister, sternly. "I thought you were in bed hours ago."

"I left the lotion for my face downstairs, and I can get no rest without it. But what are Barney and Joanna about at this time of night? As I came downstairs I saw them bringing something in through the open door." Then she whispered, "Do you know, Barbara, it looked for all the world like a corpse!"

Miss Pengarvon shuddered in spite of herself. "Letitia," she said, "go and bolt the door at the foot of the staircase that leads to Susan's bedroom. She might come down unawares, as you have. When you have done that, come back here, and I will tell you what it was that you saw Barney and Joanna bringing into the house."

CHAPTER II.

THE PENGARVON'S OF BROOME.

THE Pengarvons had been settled at Broome for three hundred years. They were the younger branch of an ancient Cornish family, which professed to be able to trace back its pedigree to the days when legend and history were so inextricably mixed that it was impossible at this distance of time to draw any nice distinction between the two. For twenty miles round they were known as "The Proud Pengarvons;" but whether this distinctive title had its origin in some mental peculiarity of the family, or in their mode of carrying themselves towards their fellows, or whether the family motto, "Pride I cherish," was responsible for it, it would not be worth while too curiously to inquire. In any case, it was accepted as an indisputable fact that the Pengarvons should be proud, and proud they were accordingly. The present mansion of Broome, which was

situate in the extreme north of the county, where the Derbyshire and Yorkshire moors impinge upon each other, dated no further back than the earlier half of the seventeenth century. It was a long, low, two-storied house, built of common grey stone indigenous to that part of the country—the same kind of stone that the rough unmortared walls were built of, which divided one field or stretch of moorland from another (for miles round Broome, hedges were few and far between). It was a house which, as regards design and ornamentation, was severely simple almost to the verge of ugliness, but, in years gone by it had been found spacious enough for all the needs of a large family, with accommodation for a score or more guests into the bargain. Sir Jasper Pengarvon, the last baronet—with whom the title became extinct for lack of heirs male—and the father of the Miss Pengarvons, to whom we have already been introduced, had married for his first wife Maria, niece of Lord Dronfield, who brought him a fortune of ten thousand pounds.

Sir Jasper was not a man to appreciate the delights of the country, or to settle down after marriage into the groove which had contented so many generations of his forefathers. While still little more than a youngster, he had developed a very pretty taste for the gaming-table, which it was impossible to gratify at Broome. So one day, after he had been nearly yawning himself to death for a week, and after a more pronounced tiff than usual with my lady, whose penurious ways were a terrible annoyance to him, he discovered that important business called him to London, and there, a few days later, his yellow posting-chariot deposited him.

After this, Broome saw little of its master except at infrequent intervals. His visits rarely lasted longer than a fortnight at a time, after which he would be off again, either to London, or to the country house of one or another of his many friends. Meanwhile, Lady Pengarvon vegetated from year end to year end in the

pined in secret and shut herself up from more closely than ever.

The Baronet had not been idle all this been doing his best, with the aid of the to dissipate the broad acres which had him from a dozen generations of thrifty was a pleasant life, but unfortunately it c ever. The end came when his eldest seventeen years old. His own fortune fortune, the proceeds of the sale of every and every foot of timber that he had the had slipped through his fingers as ea through a sieve, till nothing was left save of Broome, with a few acres of sparsely- about it, together with two small farms value of eighty pounds a year each, which the Baronet's power to touch. Beyond was complete.

It was when affairs had come to this p Pengarvon took it into her head to die. admitted that, under the circumstances, it sensible thing she could have done. The well out of her troubles.

Hardly was the funeral over, before

a rich London drysalter, with a fortune of twenty-five thousand pounds.

The new Lady Pengarvon proved to be an unrefined, good-natured woman, who had probably been very pretty when she was a dozen years younger. Between her and the young ladies, her step-daughters, there was a great gulf, which they took care she should never overpass. She was their father's wife, and as such they treated her with civility and a certain amount of respect; but it was with a civility that chilled, and with a respect which seemed ever to imply, "We cannot rid ourselves of you, and consequently must tolerate you, but don't look to us for anything more."

At the end of half a dozen years the second Lady Pengarvon went the way of her predecessor, fading slowly out of life under the cold, watchful eyes of Miss Barbara and her sister, which seemed to say, "We know you can't last long, and we shall not mourn you over-much when you are gone." She left behind her one little daughter, Isabel by name, who was at once packed off to a sister of her mother, near London; then the two Misses Pengarvon breathed more freely, and felt that Providence had not been unkind to them.

Meanwhile, Sir Jasper had resumed his old career in London as though there had never been a break in it. The young ladies saw little more of their father after the second Lady Pengarvon's death than they had before. He went down to Broome occasionally for a few days at a time, but that was all. He lived five years longer; then one morning he was found dead in his Mayfair lodging with a bullet through his heart. Once more he had come to the end of his resources. It was hopeless to think of marrying a third fortune. There stared him in the face an old age of obscure penury away from the haunts he loved so well, and the prospect daunted him. He died as he had lived, an utter pagan.

A few years later, the aunt with whom Isabel had

...the daughter of a noble grandfather
traditional beauty of the women of her fa
beauty which had so unaccountably laps
of her elder half-sisters, niece though the
been to an earl.

It was in the dusk of an autumn morn
Barney Dale and his charge reached E
Misses Pengarvon were awaiting the chil
oak parlor, which even on the brightest da
was gloomy and full of strange shadows.
sister came forward a step or two, and tak
he hand, gazed down in frowning silen
young face, which returned her look wit
rightened eyes. A faint momentary colo
allow cheeks. Then she stooped and pres
old lips to Isabel's forehead.

"So you are come back to Broome, child
better have found you another home," sh
ry, hard voice, in which not the slight
ympathy ever seemed to vibrate. Miss
opied her sister in everything, went thro
ormula.

Isabel gazed from one stern, sad-faced v
ther, and her lips quivered. She turned

funereal draperies, in which they put her to bed. All her life she had been used to being petted and made much of, and had hardly known what it was to be alone. But now she was left by herself in a great ghostly room from six o'clock at night till seven next morning. She felt herself to be quite an unconsidered trifle in that huge ocean of bed. She was morally sure that those grim portraits on the walls—dark, frowning gentlemen in perukes and embroidered clothes, and stately ladies in hoops and high-heeled shoes—whispered to each other about her, Isabel Pengarvon; and that after the candle was taken away they stepped down out of their frames, and hastened to join the other ghosts in the long gallery, where they danced and flirted and took snuff with each other, till some watchful cock on a far-away farm sounded the warning note which sent them back to their faded frames, there to attitudinize in silent mockery till another midnight should come round.

But these first fears gradually wore themselves away, and in time Isabel and the portraits became great friends. She would sit up in bed on moonlight nights, and talk to them by the hour together. She invented private histories for many of them—strings of adventures, such as only a child's brain could have imagined. Like other people, she had her favorites. Among such were "my Lady Bluesash" and "Miss Prettyshoes," "Mr. Longcurls" and "Captain Finelace," all people of quality, who were so good-natured as to have no secrets from Isabel.

With that marvellous adaptability which all children possess in a greater or lesser degree, Isabel gradually learned to look upon Broome as her home, and to have few cares or interests that were not bounded by its four grey walls. She lighted up the solitary old house like a ray of sunshine that warms and brightens at the same time. On Sundays she went with her sisters to church, and was shut up with them in the great oaken pew, with its closely-drawn curtains, where the preacher's voice

came to her as the voice of one that crieth in the wilderness, he himself being altogether unseen, and from whence nothing was visible to her wandering eyes save a portion of the groined roof and two hideous gargoyles, whose staring eyes seemed to watch her every movement.

When Isabel was fourteen years old she was sent to a school in Nottingham to complete her education. Since her arrival at Broome her only teacher had been Miss Letitia, who, in their long hours together over their lessons, had, in her own cold, formal way, grown to like the bright-eyed, high-spirited girl far better than at one time she believed it possible she ever should do. Isabel was away for three years ; at seventeen she came home "finished."

She was quite a young lady by this time—tall, slender, and with all the traditional beauty of her race. She was brimming over with mischief and high spirits, and she looked forward with dread to the dreary, uneventful life before her, with no company save that of her two middle-aged sisters—for Miss Pengarvon was now forty years old, Miss Letitia only two years younger—and to being buried alive, as it were, in that grim old house among the Derbyshire hills. Her life at school had served to show her a little of the world, from which she now felt as if she were about to be shut out forever—just enough, in fact, to make its attractions, known and unknown, all the more alluring to her vivid imagination. She had seen the Nottingham shops, gay with the manifold wares dear to a girl's heart ; she had heard the garrison band play delicious waltzes that thrilled her with emotions unknown before, and more than one audacious young officer had turned to look and look again, as she was pacing demurely to church with her school-fellows. She had devoured all the love stories that had been smuggled into the school, and she had heard other girls talking about sweethearts and possible husbands, and she could not help wondering whether

anyone would ever fall in love with her. Isabel did what few girls do—she cried bitter tears when the time came for her to bid good-bye to school for ever.

Two year passed without change. Her life of repression and isolation became at times a burden almost too heavy to be borne. Her nature was affectionate, but impulsive ; she was warm-hearted, but with something wayward in her disposition, which, under happier circumstances, would doubtless have found a vent in high spirits and innocent fun. The end of the matter was that one morning Isabel was missing. She left behind her a note addressed to Miss Pengarvon, in which she stated that she was about to be married to some one who loved her very dearly, and that she would write further particulars in a few days. For some time past, a young gentleman, name unknown, had been stopping at the King's Arms Hotel, Staving, ostensibly for fishing and sketching purposes ; but as he and Isabel had been seen together more than once, pacing the sheltered walks by the river, and as he disappeared at the same time, there could be little doubt that they had gone away together. After reading the letter, Miss Pengarvon threw it into the fire. Then she caused all Isabel's clothes to be burnt—not that the poor girl had had anything beyond a very meagre wardrobe—and locked the door of the room which had been hers and took away the key.

"She has disgraced the name she bears. Let us never speak of her again," she said in her bitterest tones to Miss Letitia. The latter was crying quietly to herself. Miss Pengarvon regarded her with silent scorn.

Three weeks later there came a second letter from Isabel, bearing the London postmark, and, a month after that, a third which had been stamped at Southampton. Both these letters Miss Pengarvon burned without opening. After that no further letter came,

and it seemed as if Isabel were indeed lost to them for ever.

Three years went by, and then came that snowy December night which brought Isabel back, a suppliant, to the door of Broome. It has already been told how Miss Pengarvon refused her admittance, how Barney Dale and his wife found her dying, or dead in the snow; and how a reluctant consent was given to her inanimate body being brought indoors by way of the back entrance. From that hour every trace of her vanished. Morning broke, the housemaid came down stairs and went about her duties, suspecting nothing. Neither inside the house nor out was any sign or token to be seen of her, who living or dead, had been carried in but a few hours before. Where was she? What had become of her? Those were questions which four people alone out of all the world could have answered, had they chosen to speak.

THE STORY.

CHAPTER I.

MR. HAZELDINE CHANGES HIS NOTES FOR GOLD.

TWENTY years, with all their manifold changes, have come and gone since Isabel Pengarvon was found one December night lying in the snow in front of the great door at Broome ; and the course of our narrative now takes us to Ashdown, a thriving town in the Midlands, of some twenty-five to thirty thousand inhabitants.

Everybody in Ashdown knew Avison's Bank, and could have directed a stranger to it. It had been established for nearly three-quarters of a century, and no bank stood higher in the estimation of the manufacturers and tradespeople of the town or of the farmers round about. Mr. Avison, senior, owing to his great age and infirmities, had retired from any active direction of the business some years ago. Mr. Avison, junior, who was himself a middle-aged man, had been abroad, with the exception of a week or two now and then, for the last year or more, in search of the health which his native country denied him. Now, however, he was coming back—was, in fact, expected almost immediately, and was once more going to try a winter at home.

Since the retirement of the elder partner, and during the absence of the younger, the entire management of the business had devolved upon Mr. Hazeldine, the chief cashier, and no one more capable of sustaining the burthen could have been found. He had been with the firm since boyhood, and in process of time had risen from one *grade to another* till it was impossible for him

some. Two sons and one daughter, the marriage, all of whom were now grown up, the elder son, was in business in Beecham, which might almost be called Ashdown, although it was in another county. He was a keen, hard-headed business man, eager in the world, and ambitious after a fortune, but he himself was aware of.

The younger son, Clement, was a surgeon. After gaining experience in London, he had bought for himself what remained of an old Doctor Diprose. Clement had taken his quarters to Ashdown, and was at the uphill fight of a young doctor in a small town. Fanny, Mr. Hazeldine's daughter, married, and lived at home with her parents.

It was customary at Avison's Bank for his chief clerk, John Brancker (generally called Bran), to go up to London by train every Thursday to change a thousand or twelve hundred pounds' notes for gold, in order to meet the requirements of the bank's numerous small customers on this particular Thursday.

pondering a thousand questions, let us endeavor, with a few touches, to bring him more definitely before the reader.

James Hazeldine at this time was fifty-four years old. He was closely shaven, except for two small side-whiskers, so that there was nothing to hide his square, clear-cut jaw, his thin lips, and firm-set mouth. In color his hair and whiskers, once nearly black, were now an iron-grey. He had a prominent, well-cut nose, and cold, resolute, steel-grey eyes. The predominant expression of his face was determination ; you felt that here was a man with a masterful spirit who would not readily be moved from any course, whether for good or evil, which he had once made up his mind to follow. Mingled with this expression was the keen, shrewd look of the experienced man of business—the look of one who in his time had chaffered and bargained with many men. In his dress Mr. Hazeldine was somewhat old-fashioned and precise ; possibly it was part of his policy to be so. He wore a black tail-coat and waist-coat, and pepper-and-salt continuations. He wore a starched checked cravat, high-pointed collars and broad-toed shoes with drab gaiters. With the addition of an overcoat in winter, his dress was the same all the year round.

To-day, however, Mr. Hazeldine was not looking in his usual health. There was a worn and anxious expression on his face like that of a man who had been much worried of late. His eyes, too, looked sunken and dull, but his mouth was as firm-set as ever. Only a few days ago his daughter Fanny had said to her mother :

“Have you noticed how fast papa's hair has been turning grey of late ?”

But Mrs. Hazeldine, whose eyesight was no longer as good as it had once been, had noticed nothing.

Mr. Hazeldine roused himself from his reverie with a sigh when the train stopped for the collection of tickets,

morton Street, where he plunged into a
and tortuous courts and passages, near
have been swept away within the last f

Threading his way like one who he
presently dived into the semi-dark entr
oldest houses; the numerous names
door-posts betokening that it was split
suites of offices. Ascending slowly to
with feet which seemed weighted with l
dine turned the handle of a certain door.
He found himself in an outer office oc
clerks.

"Is Mr. Barker within and disengaged

"What name, sir?" queried one of the
answering the double question.

"Mr. James," was the reply.

The clerk was scarcely gone a mon
open the door of the inner office, he said

"Mr. Barker will see you, sir."

Mr. James went in, and the door wa
him.

At a square table, with his back to th
Barker, a stout, bald-headed, foxy-lookin

"I shall have no objection at all, Mr. James. It don't matter to me—ha ! ha !—in what form it comes, so long as I get hold of it. What nice weather we have been having of late."

Mr. James opened his bag and drew therefrom twelve small canvas bags containing one hundred sovereigns each. "Be good enough to count these," he said.

Mr. Barker emptied one bag on the table and counted its contents into little piles of twenty sovereigns each.

"I won't detain you, Mr. James, while I count the rest," he said. "I have no doubt I shall find them quite correct."

"There are twelve there," said Mr. James, indicating the bags. Then he drew a roll of notes from his breast-pocket. "These will make up the seventeen."

Mr. Barker took the notes, wetted his forefinger, and counted them one by one.

"Right you are, sir, and I'm very much obliged to you," was his comment when he had done. Then he went to a safe in one corner, and having deposited the notes and gold in it, he drew from a receptacle containing several other documents of a similar kind, a long, narrow strip of bluish paper, which he handed to his visitor. "All ready and prepared, you see," he said, with a smile.

Mr. James just glanced at the document, then he crumpled it up, and flinging it into the fire, watched it till nothing was left of it but ashes.

Mr. Barker laughed.

"Have a glass of sherry. You are not looking over-bright to-day," he said, heartily.

"Thanks ; I never drink before dinner," was the answer. "I have been worried a little in business matters lately, that is all," he added. "But I am going to take a long holiday presently."

"Nothing like it when you're fagged out, or when the machinery gets a bit out of gear," responded Mr. Barker. "Can't keep the bow always bent, you know."

Sha'n't see you again for some time, then? South of France—Italian Lakes—eh?"

"Well, I hardly know yet where I am bound for," said Mr. James, with a curious, pallid smile. Then he took up his hat and brushed it round with his sleeve in a hesitating way very unusual with him. "Nothing you see or hear ever surprises you, does it, Mr. Barker?" he asked.

"Well, no, Mr. James. I'm rather too old a bird to be surprised at anything."

"Then you won't be surprised at anything you may read in the papers in the course of the next few days."

Mr. Barker winked and laid a finger against one side of his nose. As an action it was vulgar, but expressive.

Mr. James nodded and smiled the same curious smile.

"Good-morning, Mr. Barker," he said. "Good-morning. I'll leave this empty bag till next time I call."

"Which I hope will be before very long, eh, Mr. James? Always happy to accommodate you, you know."

"We shall see what we shall see. And so, once more, good-morning." He went without another word, closing the green baize door behind him. A minute later he found himself in the street.

Mr. James Hazeldine walked on till he was overtaken by an empty cab. This he hailed, and was driven westward. Although he had told Mr. Barker that he never drank before dinner, he now went into a tavern in the Strand, and called for a tumbler of hot brandy and water and then for another, both of which he drank in less than five minutes. In truth, he looked very haggard and ill. During the next half hour he wandered up and down the Strand in a purposeless sort of way, staring into the shop windows, but having no thought or interest in anything he saw there. More than once he took a letter out of the breast pocket of

his coat, read the address over to himself, and then put it back again. At length, spying a pillar-box in a side street, he walked slowly up to it and again took out the letter. It was directed as under :

“ EDWARD HAZELDINE, ESQ.,
“ The Brewery,
“ Beecham by Ashdown,
“ Midlandsire.”

He dropped the letter into the box.

“ That settles everything,” he muttered. “ There can be no turning back now. Edward will get it by the first post to-morrow.”

Why was Mr. Hazeldine posting a letter to his son, whom he would probably see in the course of the evening ?

He turned back into the Strand, and entering a restaurant, called for a basin of soup. He ate about half of it, finished up with a glass of sherry, and then ordered a cab and was driven to the terminus.

Going into the cloak-room at the station, he there redeemed a black bag, precisely similar in size and appearance to the empty bag he had left in Mr. Barker's office. This bag, which apparently contained something heavy, he took with him into the carriage and placed it in the netting over his head.

There were other passengers in the compartment, but he spoke to no one. He pulled up the collar of his coat and shut his eyes, and, to all appearance, went fast asleep. The clocks were striking seven as he walked out of Ashdown station, carrying his bag in one hand and his umbrella in the other.

Mr. Hazeldine's house was not far from the station. He let himself in by means of his latchkey, and walked straight into the drawing-room, where he found his wife and daughter.

“ You are late this evening, dear,” said Mrs. Hazel-

dine, languidly, as if his being so were a matter of no moment.

"Yes, I had some special business to transact, and could not get done in time to catch the two o'clock train."

And yet he had spent nearly an hour mooning about the Strand!

He sat down in his easy-chair with an air of weariness.

"We did not wait dinner for you, not knowing how late you would be," resumed his wife. "Will you have a steak cooked, or what shall I order for you?"

"I had some dinner in town; all I want is a cup of tea."

His daughter rang the bell, and presently a tea equipage was brought in.

"You are not looking at all well, papa," said Fanny, as she handed him a cup. "I hope you are not going back to that horrid Bank to-night."

"I am quite well, my dear," he said. "A little tired with my journey; that's all. I must go to the Bank for a couple of hours." He drew her face down to his own and kissed it.

"There now, you have disarranged my collar, you dear old bear," she said, turning to survey herself in the glass over the chimney-piece.

"You scarcely ever spend an evening at home nowadays, James," said Mrs. Hazeldine, in the complaining tone to which her husband was well used. "You seem to care for nothing but the Bank. Instead of taking things easy as you get older, you seem to have to work harder every year that you live."

"I hope we shall see more of you at home when Mr. Avison gets back," remarked Fanny.

Mr. Hazeldine shivered, and then he sipped at his tea.

"Do you know what I am going to do?" he asked, presently. "I am going to take a long, long holiday."

"Oh, papa! when—when?" cried Fanny the excitable.

"Almost immediately."

"You darling old crocodile ! I'm languishing to visit Switzerland again. But, of course, one can't go there at this time of year. The Riviera, and then on to Rome, would be delightful. I am dying to see Rome."

"Give me Paris, either in winter or summer," said Mrs. Hazeldine, with the air of a person who knows her own mind. "I care nothing for a parcel of mouldy ruins, but I do love nice shops ; and there are no shops in the world equal to those of Paris."

CHAPTER II.

"FAREWELL, A LONG FAREWELL."

MRS. HAZELDINE was a lady of fifty, who, in the small circles of Ashdown society, had at one time been accounted a beauty, and who sometimes found it difficult to forget that she was one no longer. On her delicate, clear-cut features there rested habitually a pinched and careworn expression. She was a woman who, never having known any real trouble, made her life a perpetual worry with those small, everyday grievances which we all have to contend against in a greater or lesser degree. To wail over the shortcomings of her servants, to moan over certain fancied ailments, to discuss the last morsel of local gossip with this friend or that, or to immerse herself for the time being with Fanny in preparations for the next ball, or garden party, or flower show, seemed to be the sole objects for which Mrs. Hazeldine existed. And yet there was one more object for which she lived, and that was to see her daughter married to some man of wealth and position—two qualifications which, she persuaded herself, were absolutely indispensable to marital felicity. As yet, she and Fanny were waiting for the coming Prince, who, so far, had not even put in an appearance. But Mrs. Westerton, of Owenscraig, was going to give a fancy-dress ball on the nineteenth, to which Mrs. Hazeldine

and her daughter had been invited, and just now expectation ran high in the breasts of both.

Fanny Hazeldine was a pretty blonde who had seen her twenty-second birthday. Her mother, when young, had been noted for her slender and graceful figure, and one of Fanny's chief desires was that she should be noted in the same way. She had been troubled in her mind of late by a suspicion that she was imperceptibly, but surely, increasing in bulk. She laced so tightly that sometimes she felt as if she could scarcely breathe; but even that did not seem to have the desired effect. Unfortunately, Fanny was blessed with a fine, healthy appetite, and a great liking for the good things of the table. It was a pathetic sight at dinner to see the poor girl struggling between her natural inclination for some tempting dish, and the certainty which beset her that by partaking of it she would not be tending to promote the object on which her heart was so firmly fixed. She had been brought up by her mother's side, and had imbibed her mother's notions and prejudices; and, in such a case, unless there was some native strength of character, as the mother is, so to a great extent will the daughter prove to be. Fanny's pretty head was filled with thoughts of sweethearts and possible conquests, and whether this style of dress would suit her, or that mode of hat become her best—and with very little beside.

"Oh, papa," she cried, "Captain Lacie has lent me such a charming Book of Costumes. All the plates are colored. I do wish you would look through it and say which costume you would like me to appear in at Mrs. Westerton's fancy ball."

"Mrs. Westerton's fancy ball!" echoed Mr. Hazeldine, with a strangely dismal laugh. "What should I know about such frivolities? Besides, I'm too tired to-night. Then, again, something may happen to hinder you from going—one never can tell."

"It would have to be something very particular that would keep me away," said Fanny, with a pout. "I'm

dying to go—only I can't make up my mind whether to go as a Breton fish-wife, as a Louis-Sèize marquise, or——"

At this moment the door opened, and in marched Edward Hazeldine. He had caught his sister's last sentence.

"If I were you, Fan, I should go as Ophelia, with straws in your hair," he said. "A touch of madness would become you admirably."

"Why don't you keep your rude speeches for your fine lady friends at Seaham Lodge?" asked Fanny, with her nose in the air and a heightened color. But next minute she poured out a cup of tea for her brother and took it to him.

Edward Hazeldine was a robust, strongly-built man of thirty, not unlike what his father had been at the same age. His face was instinct with energy and determination. He had his father's thin lips, and his father's cold, steel-grey eyes. He was brusque in manner and decided in all his movements. He was a man who had an excellent opinion of himself, and a dogged belief that whatever he might choose to say or do must be the right thing to say or do. He was not the sort of man you would ask a favor of without thinking twice before doing so. Children rarely made friends with him, and vagrants of every kind had a rooted aversion to him. His ambition—and it was an ambition which in most men of his position would have seemed of that vaulting kind which Shakespeare has told us about, but, somehow, it did not seem so in his case—was one day to win for himself a seat in Parliament; but it was a secret which he kept locked in his own breast.

"Have you been up to town to-day?" he asked, as he sat down near his father.

"Yes. I had a little business to transact which Brancker could not do for me, so I got the notes changed at the same time."

There was something in his father's tone that struck

Edward. He bent his eyes on him more attentively than he had hitherto done, and then he saw how careworn and haggard he looked. He did not, however, make any remark about it, knowing how much his father disliked being noticed; besides which, his thoughts were just then running on a very unpleasant matter which more immediately concerned himself.

"I had a bit of bad news this afternoon," he presently remarked.

"Aye—what was that?" asked Mr. Hazeldine, lifting his eyes from the carpet to his son's face, but betraying no curiosity in the way he put the question.

"One of my customers at Monkshill has let me in for a debt of twenty pounds—the scoundrel."

"I would not call a man a scoundrel for the sake of a paltry twenty pounds," said Fanny, as she peeped into the teapot.

"Yes, you would, Miss, if you had to work for your living as I have," retorted her brother. "How long would it take you to earn a 'paltry twenty pounds,' as you call it, I wonder?"

"I could spend it much more quickly than I could earn it, I have no doubt," retorted Miss Fan, with a saucy smile. "Still, I am quite sure——"

"I am quite sure that you don't know what you are talking about," interrupted her brother, brusquely. "Leave business matters for men to deal with, and attend to your feathers and fal-lals. A paltry sum indeed!" He pushed back his chair in a huff and laid hold of his hat.

"Edward always was short-tempered, and I suppose he always will be," murmured Mrs. Hazeldine, *sotto voce*, with the air of a martyr.

"Going already?" asked Mr. Hazeldine.

"Yes; I've a couple more calls to make before going home. What a scamp that fellow must be!" Edward could not forget his twenty pounds. Money was very dear to his soul.

Mr. Hazeldine took one of his son's hands in both his. "Good-bye—good-bye, and God bless you !" he said, in a low voice. Edward looked surprised, but said nothing. "I would not let this loss worry you overmuch, if I were you. After all, the sum is not a large one, and there are worse things in life to endure than the loss of a few pounds."

Edward chafed a little. He had expected sympathy, instead of which he was being lectured. "I'll oppose his certificate, for all that," he muttered, viciously. He withdrew his hand abruptly from his father's grasp, and with an all-round "Good-night," not very graciously spoken, he marched out of the room, shaking an imaginary fist in "that scoundrel's" face as he went.

Mr. Hazeldine sank back into his chair without a word more. He had made no mention to his son of the letter which he had posted to his address that afternoon in London.

About five minutes later, there was a tremendous rat-a-tat at the front door.

"Whoever can that be?" cried Fanny, springing up and taking a hasty survey of herself in the glass.

The visitors proved to be Mrs. and Miss Maywood, two fashionable friends of Mrs. Hazeldine and Fanny. After the two young ladies had kissed each other, and the two elder ones had shaken hands, and made one or two mutual inquiries, Mrs. Maywood and her daughter condescended to extend the tips of their fingers to the master of the house. He was the money-making machine, and as such a necessary adjunct of existence ; but beyond that point he was a nonentity.

As it turned out, Mrs. Maywood and her daughter were also going to Mrs. Westerton's fancy ball, and they had come to have a quiet gossip with their friends anent that all-important event. How fortunate that Captain Lacie's *Book of Costumes* was there ! It opened up an inexhaustible mine of conversational topics. As they criticised one plate after another, it seemed to them as if

they could have gone on talking for a week ; and if occasionally they were all talking at once, it did not greatly matter.

Mr. Hazeldine began to feel himself *de trop*.

Presently he looked at his watch, and then he got up and stood with his back to the fire. There was a grey, earthy look about his face, and a strange glassiness in his eyes. Fanny came up to him.

"Are you going now?" she asked.

"Yes ; the sooner I go, the sooner I shall finish what I have to do."

"What a shame that you have to leave home again at this time of night !"

"Not a bit of it. Business is business, and must be attended to."

There was an assumption of gaiety in his tone which his looks belied. He was gazing down with wistful, yearning eyes into the fair young face before him. Suddenly he enfolded Fanny in his arms and pressed her to his heart ; then he kissed her three or four times very tenderly on her lips, her forehead, and her hair. This was a proceeding so entirely novel in Fanny's experience of her father, that for a moment or two she was at a loss what to make of it. Then it struck her, in her little mercenary way, that it would be foolish on her part not to take advantage of such an unwonted burst of paternal affection. Surely, when he kissed her in that way, he could not have the heart to refuse her anything !

"Papa, dear," she whispered, "I saw such a lovely pair of earrings in Wilson's window the other day. Turquoises and diamonds. I'm dying to have them."

Mr. Hazeldine looked at her vaguely for a moment or two as though his mind were far away. Then he smiled faintly, and said : "Speak to me about them again to-morrow. Yes—to-morrow."

"You darling old kangaroo !" she exclaimed, and with that she squeezed his face between her hands and kissed him in her impulsive fashion.

"Has Clement been here this evening?" asked Mr. Hazeldine.

"No, papa. He does not call so often of an evening now as he used to do. He is nearly always at John Brancker's. Everybody knows why he goes there so often."

"I for one don't know, unless it be to play the fiddle."

"Oh, that's a mere blind. He goes to see that Hermia Rivers, of course. It's my opinion that he's in love with her."

"In love with Hermia Rivers? Well, he might do worse. I don't know a more charming girl than Miss Rivers."

"Charming, do you call her?" said Miss Fan, with a toss of her head. "Where are your eyes, papa? You really ought to interfere. There's no doubt she's trying to inveigle Clem into a promise of marriage."

"Clement's quite old enough to know his own mind and to judge for himself; and, as I said before, Miss Rivers is a charming girl."

He turned lingeringly away, and went up to his wife.

"Good-night, Maria," he said.

Mrs. Hazeldine was busy discussing some question of *chiffons* with Mrs. Maywood. She looked up when her husband spoke.

"Why do you say good-night?" she asked.

"Because I shall not be home till late. You had better not sit up for me."

"Very well, dear; you have your latch-key, I suppose. I will have a little gas left on in the hall."

She turned to Mrs. Maywood again, thinking her husband would go; but he suddenly bent down, and taking her face gently between his hands, he turned it up to his and kissed it twice.

"Good gracious, James! what are you about?—and before company, too!" cried Mrs. Hazeldine, quite in a fluster, as she readjusted her cap-strings.

But her husband had gone, taking his black bag with

him. Miss Maywood, from the opposite side of the table, had seen how white his face was, and how his lips twitched as he turned away ; but such matters were no concern of hers.

On leaving the house Mr. Hazeldine did not take the turning which led the nearest way to the Bank, but one which led away from it. After walking for a few minutes he stopped opposite a small, semi-detached house. One window was lighted up, and in it was a wire blind, on which the word "Surgery" was painted. It was the house of Clement Hazeldine. Instead of going up to it, Mr. Hazeldine went across the road and sought the shelter of a dark entry. Here he waited patiently for a full quarter of an hour. At the end of that time the light in the surgery was extinguished, and presently Clement emerged from the house and strode away at a rapid pace, carrying his fiddle-case in one hand. Mr. Hazeldine quitted his hiding-place as his son turned up the street.

"Clement ! Clement !" he called, and there was a ring of agony in his voice. But the young man heard him not, and went quickly on his way.

Mr. Hazeldine said no more, but waited till his son was out of sight, and then turned in the direction of the Bank. A few minutes' walking brought him to it. Sweet, the porter, who with his wife lived in the basement and was custodian of the premises, was lowering the gas in the lobby, as Mr. Hazeldine went in.

"There's a light in the general office. Who's at work there ?" asked the latter.

"Mr. Brancker and Mr. Judd are there yet, sir," answered Sweet. "I left a little gas on in your office, thinking you might be back, sir."

"All right, Sweet. Mr. Brancker and Judd will be off before long, I suppose ?"

"Yes, sir ; they told me just now that they intended clearing out in a few minutes."

"Good-night, Sweet."

"Good-night, sir."

Mr. Hazeldine passed into his private office, shut the door, and turned up the gas.

CHAPTER III.

TEA, TALK, AND MUSIC.

AVISON's Bank had been built about twenty years. It had been erected on the site of a much older building which dated from the period of William and Mary, and, after serving for several generations as the family mansion of the Colvilles, had been converted into a bank. The present structure was a plain but substantial building of red brick with freestone facings. It was entered from the street through large folding inner doors which swung easily to-and-fro on their well-oiled hinges. On the right a glazed swing-door led into the public office, where sundry clerks behind a long counter were prepared to honor your cheques, or to receive at your hands whatsoever sums you might be desirous of entrusting to the safe keeping of the Bank. This outer office was divided from an inner one by a half-glass partition. In the inner office John Brancker and Ephraim Judd were generally to be seen busily engaged on the Bank ledgers; John, as the senior official next to Mr. Hazeldine, being there to be referred to in case of any dispute or doubtful point cropping up in the outer office. This inner office had a second door which opened into the main corridor, and a third door into a fireproof room where books and securities could be safely lodged. On the left, as you entered from the street, were also two doors, both of which bore the word "Private." The first of them opened into Mr. Hazeldine's office, the second into that of Mr. Avison. In the former was the entrance to the strong room in which were the bullion safes, together with other things of scarcely less importance. In this room there was no

window, and during business hours the gas was kept constantly alight in it, ventilation being supplied by means of a small grated opening in the outer wall. Finally, there was a door of communication between Mr. Hazeldine's office and that of Mr. Avison.

As Sweet, the night-watchman, had informed Mr. Hazeldine, John Brancker and Ephraim Judd were at work this evening in the inner office. It was no unusual thing for them to work overtime at certain periods of the month. John Brancker had been in the service of the Bank for between sixteen and seventeen years. He was a homely-featured, plainly-dressed man of five-and-forty, with no pretensions to style or fashion. It was this very unpretentiousness, in conjunction with a certain simplicity of character and a cheerfulness of disposition that never varied, which combined to make him such a universal favorite ; everybody in the town knew John Brancker and everybody liked him.

Ephraim Judd was twenty years younger than his fellow-clerk. Mr. Avison the elder had brought him to the Bank when a boy, and there he had been ever since. He was lame, the result of an accident in childhood, and he made use of a stout stick when walking to and from business, although he never seemed to need it when passing from one part of the Bank to another, but got over the ground with a sort of hop and skip which had rather a comical effect in the eyes of strangers. He was a tall, narrow-chested young man, with long, straight, black hair, a sallow complexion, and thin, eager, hungry-looking features. His ears were abnormally large and stuck out prominently from his head, and it was a matter of common report among his fellow clerks that Ephraim could move them backward or forward, after the fashion of certain animals, at will. Like John Brancker, he dressed very plainly, almost shabbily, presenting thereby a marked contrast to some of the juniors, with their chains and rings and elaborate display of collar and cuffs. Mr. Judd's chest was delicate, and

when the weather was at all bad he wore a respirator, and at other times he generally muffled himself up carefully about the throat in a long, worsted comforter of many colors. It might be for the same reason, perhaps, that he nearly always wore india rubber overshoes ; but that could hardly be the reason why his stick should be shod with the same material. By means of his galoshes Ephraim was enabled to move noiselessly about from place to place, and he sometimes quite startled Sweet, who was pursy and scant of breath, by going up behind him and touching him suddenly on the shoulder when he had no idea that anyone was near him.

"Drat that Mr. Judd with his ingy-rubber shoes !" the night-watchman would say to his wife. "I wish he wouldn't shake one's narves so. He steals about the building like a ghost, or—or as if he was going to commit a burglary ; and one never knows whether he's behind one, or in front of one, or where he is."

It was somewhat singular that Ephraim should be so little of a favorite among his fellow clerks—but so it was. He was a man not much given to talking ; he kept his own counsel, making friends of nobody, giving offence to none, and seemingly trying to efface himself as much as possible ; yet everybody seemed to have a vague distrust of him ; everybody had the feeling that he was a man who hid more than he showed on the surface—everybody, that is, except simple-hearted John Brancker, who was proud of Ephraim's cleverness at figures, and proud of his handwriting, which was the best of anyone's in the Bank.

Sweet put his head into the office where the two men were at work. "Mr. Hazeldine has come, sir," he said, addressing himself to Mr. Brancker. "I thought you might perhaps have something you wanted to see him about."

"I don't think I shall trouble him to-night," answered John ; "he will be tired, and what matters I have to see him about will keep till morning."

of young lady I should like to make position to do so."

John laughed.

"Yes, Miss Hazeldine is pretty—that; but whether she would make a suit a man like you may be open to."

"Oh, you are a confirmed old bachelor; we are not supposed to know anything about you."

A shadow flitted across John's face.

"May it not be because we old bachelors know much about the ladies that we remain unmarried?" asked, with a smile. "Have you any more to make up to Miss Hazeldine?"

"Now you are poking fun at me, John; I would not condescend to look at a poor bachelor."

John shut up his inkstand and began to read his books.

"Are you going to stay much longer?"

"I shall finish this ledger and then I shall be about enough of figures for one day."

John presently bade the other good night, and he, still perched on his high stool, ten minutes carried him home. He had

"What capital time they keep!" he said to himself. "They are playing something I've never heard before. I suppose Mr. Clement has been having some new music from London."

John's terrier heard its master's footsteps on the gravel, and began to bark a welcome; the duet ceased in the middle of a bar; Hermia ran to the door, greeted her uncle with a kiss, and relieved him of his hat and coat, the cat came and purred round his legs, its tail erect in the air; his sister met him with that cheery smile without which home would not have seemed like home; and Clement Hazeldine gave him a hearty grip of the hand.

"We were missing your flute sadly," said the latter. "I have brought two or three fresh pieces this evening, and we were trying one of them over."

"You are very late, dear; but I have kept the teapot in the cosy for you," said Miss Brancker.

"And there's a fire which plainly says, 'Why don't you let me toast you some muffins,'" added Hermia.

"Sweet brought me up some tea about six o'clock," said John; "but I daresay I can manage another cup."

"Of course you can, uncle," rejoined Hermia. "Why, I have known you drink four cups many a time, and then ask for more."

"That must have been when I was very thirsty indeed; but little girls should never tell tales out of school."

Presently Hermia was on her knees toasting a couple of muffins at the sitting-room fire, for at Nairn Cottage the kitchen fire was allowed to go out after the early two o'clock dinner, when the girl, who came to do the rough work in the morning, was dismissed for the day.

"I left your father at the office," remarked John to Clement. "He has been to London, and I fancy that he did not get back till the seven o'clock train."

"I wish he would not stay so late, night after night,"

answered Clement. "Have you not noticed how careworn he has been looking of late?"

"I can't say that I have remarked much difference in him, but that may be because I see him every day."

Clement shook his head.

"He has certainly aged very much of late. I was quite pained the other day to see him so worn and anxious-looking. I wish he would take a couple of months' rest right away from business."

John smiled.

"I know him better than you do, Mr. Clement. He would be miserable away from the Bank. But when Mr. Avison returns there will be no necessity for him to work so hard; and you must talk to him seriously about his health."

When John had finished his modest cup of tea he took up the poker and gave four loud taps with it on the back of the grate. Presently there came four taps in response, and a few minutes later Mr. Kittaway, John's next door neighbor, came in, followed by a servant girl carrying his violoncello in its case.

Mr. Kittaway was a retired wine merchant. He was a little, high-dried, bald old gentleman, with gold-rimmed spectacles, and an enormously high and stiff white cravat, above which his puckered face peered out as though he were gazing at one over a wall.

"What can have become of Frank?" queried John, presently. "It must be more than a week since he was here last. He's not ill, or I should have missed him from the office."

No one save Clement noticed the vivid blush that dyed Hermia's cheek. Fortunately the question was addressed to Miss Brancker.

"When he was here last he was all agog to join the New Spanish class at the Institute," responded the latter. "He has a great idea about reading 'Don Quixote' in the original."

"Frank is always agog after something new," said

John, with a laugh, "which more often than not comes to nothing in the end. He's as changeable as the moon, as I've told him many a time. Still, he might have given us a look-in before now."

"If you were to walk as far as the 'Crown and Cushion'—not that it would be worth anyone's while to do so," remarked Mr. Kittaway, in his driest manner—"I have no doubt you would find Master Frank at the present moment practising the spot-stroke, with the stump of a cigar between his teeth, and his hat very much at the back of his head."

It was known to all those present that there was no love lost between the ex-wine merchant and Frank Derison.

"There are four of us—just a comfortable quartette," resumed the little man—"which, in my opinion, is much preferable to a quintette; more especially when one of the five happens to keep execrable time."

This was another hit at the absent Frank.

"Come, come, friend Nathan," said John, slapping him lightly on the knee. "Frank's not quite so bad as you try to make out. He may be fond of a game of billiards—nowadays most young men seem to be—but where's the harm? I've often wished I could handle a cue; but I don't think I could if I were to try for a hundred years. And as for the bad time Frank keeps when he plays, I put that down to pure carelessness."

"There ought to be no carelessness where music is in question," interrupted the little man, hotly. "Music calls forth, and will be content with nothing less than the highest faculties of a man's nature; and where those are not given ungrudgingly, the result is a farce, sir—a wretched farce." He emphasized his last words with a vicious twang of one of the strings of his 'cello.

John laughed, but said nothing. He was too accustomed to his friend's tirades to attempt any confutation of them.

And so the little concert began. Hermia sat down to

the piano, John brought out his beloved flute, Clement screwed up the strings of his fiddle, while Mr. Kittaway settled his spectacles and gave a preliminary scrape or two on his 'cello. Miss Brancker fixed herself in a corner near the fire with her knitting and a kitten on her lap.

Charlotte Brancker was two years younger than John, and was a feminine copy of him. She had the same homely features, somewhat softened in their outlines, but charged with goodness in one case as in the other. There was the same pleasant smile, the same ever-cheerful manner, the same thoughtfulness for the comfort of others. Two more thoroughly unselfish people than John Brancker and his sister it would have been hard to find.

Hermia Rivers, their orphan niece, had lived with them since she was three years old. She was now turned twenty, and was a very lovely girl. Her hair was the color of ripe corn in sunlight ; her eyes were of the hue of violets when they first open their dewy lids to the morn ; her face was instinct with thought and refinement.

It is almost needless to say that Clement Hazeldine was very much in love with her, although he had grave reasons for fearing that her heart was already given to Frank Derison. That there was some secret understanding between the two, his eyes, rendered keen by love, had not failed to convince him ; and a secret understanding between two young people can, as a rule, have but one termination. Greatly he feared the worst ; but there was a stubbornness of disposition about him which would not allow him to give up while a grain of hope was left to sustain him.

Meanwhile, he found it impossible to keep away from Nairn Cottage. Two or three evenings a week found him there, and he was always made welcome. The ostensible object of his visits was to form one in the little musical gatherings which, every Monday and

Thursday evenings, wooed "the heavenly maid" in Miss Brancker's sitting-room.

CHAPTER IV.

A LAGGARD IN LOVE.

As Hermia sat playing this evening all the attention she was obliged to give to the music could not keep her uncle's words from ringing in her ears: "He is as changeable as the moon, as I have told him many a time." What if Frank had changed towards her, and were never to come and see her more!

She knew, or thought she knew, the reason why Frank Derison had kept away from Nairn Cottage for upwards of a week. On the occasion of his last visit, when she was at the piano, and he was turning over her music, there being no one but themselves in the room, he had suddenly stooped and imprinted a kiss on her cheek. She had started up in a flame of indignation, and the result had been a short but sharp passage of arms between the two. There was a sort of half-engagement between them (of which more hereafter), sufficiently binding, however, in Frank's opinion, to allow of his stealing a kiss "without a fellow being called over the coals for it as if he had committed some awful crime." But Hermia took a totally opposite view, and Frank was made to understand that, on no account, must he attempt to take such a liberty again. Thereupon, the young fellow had flung out of the cottage in a huff, and had not been near since; while Hermia, as a matter of course, had locked herself in her bedroom, and had a good cry all to herself.

The concert this evening went on for upwards of an hour. Then came an interruption. Dr. Hazeldine was wanted in haste by one of his patients.

"My father would fain have made a doctor of me," remarked Mr. Kittaway, parenthetically, "but I said,

'Give me a business that will leave me my own master at night, and that will ensure me from being called out of bed to go tramping through the rain or snow at all sorts of hours.' "

"It's nothing when you are used to it," said Clement, with a laugh.

"It seems to me very inconsiderate of people to be taken ill in the middle of the night," remarked the old gentleman, as he peered into his snuff-box; "matters ought to be arranged differently somehow." Mr. Kitt-away stayed about half an hour after Clement's departure. After partaking of a small mug of warm elder wine and a soft biscuit, he, too, took his leave.

"I think I will walk as far as Strong's, and see whether he is likely to turn up on Sunday," said John, a few minutes later.

John was organist at the parish church, and Strong was the man who blew the bellows for him.

"It is rather late for you to go out," observed Miss Brancker.

"The night is fine, and the walk will do me good. Besides, if Strong is no better, I must look out for a substitute to-morrow."

Charlotte followed her brother to the garden gate.

"It seems to blow very like for rain," she said, as she held up her hand to ascertain the way of the wind. "Had you not better take your umbrella?"

But when the umbrella came to be looked for it could not be found.

"I must have left it at the Bank," said John, who was rather absent-minded in small matters; "but I don't think I shall need it to-night."

After a few more words he went his way, humming to himself one of the airs he had been playing. His sister watched him down the street till he was lost in the darkness; then she turned, and was on the point of going indoors, when Frank Derison came hurrying up from the opposite direction.

"Better late than never, Miss Brancker," he said, with his thin, careless laugh. "I suppose I'm just about in time to bid you good night."

"Just about," answered the spinster, dryly. "We had some thought of sending the bellman round. "We were anxious to know whether you were lost, stolen, or had strayed away of your own accord."

"I daresay you know, Miss Brancker, that I sometimes try to earn a little money by making up tradesmen's books of an evening. Well, I've had a special job of the kind to do during the last week, and that's why I've not been near the Cottage."

This was a little invention on Master Frank's part, made up on the spur of the moment, and he laughed to himself when he found how readily the simple-minded spinster took it in. In reality, his evenings had been spent in the billiard-room of the "Crown and Cushion." While he had offended Hermia at their last meeting, what she had said had been a source of offence to him, and he had stayed away purposely, if only to prove to her, as he said to himself, that he was not going to be tied to any girl's apron-string.

"Won't you come in for a little while?" said Aunt Charlotte; "John is out, and Hermy and I are all alone."

"Not to-night, I think, thanks all the same. My mother is not well, and I promised not to be late home this evening." This latter statement was also a little fiction on Frank's part.

"In that case, of course, I cannot press you to stay."

"Have you had any music to-night?" asked Frank abruptly.

"Yes, both Mr. Kittaway and Clement Hazeldine were here, but Clement was called away to a patient, and the party broke up early."

"Confound that fellow! he's always here!" muttered Frank, between his teeth. Then aloud: "I've brought a late rose for Hermia; perhaps you won't mind giving

it her." And with that he proceeded to detach the flower from his button-hole. •

"Why not give it her yourself? I'm sure that would be much nicer," said Miss Charlotte, archly. "I wonder she has not come to the gate before now; but perhaps she doesn't know who's here. I'll go and fetch her."

"She knows well enough who's here, the huzzy!" growled Frank under his breath. "It's merely a try-on—that's what it is. They all do it. What simpletons they must take us men for, to think we can't see through their little games. But I suppose there are some born fools who can't."

They had been standing at the wicket of the little garden which divided the house from the road, the front door being wide open all this time. Miss Brancker now hurried up the pathway into the Cottage. Hermia was in none of the lower rooms. She called her by name, and then the girl appeared at the head of the stairs, her hair unbound and flowing over her shoulders.

"Frank is at the gate. He has brought a rose which he wishes to give you. Won't you come down?"

"Not to-night, aunt, please. Really and truly I've a wretched headache. Besides, my hair is down, and—"

"Bother!" exclaimed Miss Charlotte. "It wouldn't take you a second to tie a bit of ribbon round it."

"You must really excuse me, aunt, and so must Frank. He can send me the rose through you, if he wishes me to have it."

"That won't be half so nice as giving you it himself."

But Hermia had disappeared.

Miss Charlotte went back, rubbing her nose.

"I suppose there's been a tiff between them," she said to herself. "Well, well! At lover's perjuries they say Jove laughs, and no doubt he does the same at their quarrels."

Frank, with his hands deep in his pockets, was whistling in a minor key when she reached the gate.

He laughed a laugh which was by no means as pleasant as usual, at Aunt Charlotte's lame excuse.

"Well, here is the rose, at any rate," he said. "Let us hope she won't disdain it as she has disdained the giver."

As he spoke he kissed the flower, and handed it to Miss Brancker.

"Pray, don't forget to tell her that my love goes with it," he added, with another laugh. "And now, good-night; my mother will think I'm lost."

Then they shook hands and parted.

"I often wonder whether the young baggage is aware of the twelve hundred pounds standing to her credit in the books of the Dulminster Bank," he said to himself as he went along. "It would be strange if she isn't. And yet sometimes I'm inclined to think she knows nothing about it."

It was far from being his intention to go straight home. He turned into the "Crown and Cushion" as a matter of course. There was time for one last game of billiards before the house closed for the night.

Miss Brancker did not fail to give Hermia both the rose and the message. The girl smiled faintly at the latter. The flower she put in water, but neither then nor afterwards did she touch it with her lips, as Aunt Charlotte told her Frank had done before sending it.

Frank Derison's mother, who had been many years a widow, was half-cousin to Mr. Avison. At sixteen Frank had entered the Bank as junior clerk, and there he had since remained, being treated in no way differently from any other member of the staff, the relationship between himself and Mr. Avison being never recognized by the latter; a state of things which to Frank seemed exactly the reverse of that which ought to have subsisted between the two.

Nature, if she had any intentions at all in the framing of Frank Derison, certainly never intended him for a bank clerk. He hated his work: indeed it is doubtful

whether he would not have hated work of any kind ; but not being able to help himself, he contrived to get through it from day to day, although in a very half-hearted and perfunctory sort of way. John Brancker, however, had conceived a great liking for the handsome, careless, bright-eyed young fellow, who had always a merry laugh for everybody and everything ; and he so managed to gloss over his faults and shortcomings—which, in truth, were not very glaring ones—as, with rare exceptions, to keep him from being found fault with either by Mr. Avison or Mr. Hazeldine.

From this it came to pass that by-and-bye Frank began to be a somewhat frequent visitor at Nairn Cottage, where he quite won the heart of Miss Brancker, as he did the hearts of most people with whom he was brought into contact. As time went on he and Hermia were naturally thrown much together, and each began to find in the other that sweet but dangerous quality of attraction which, as a rule, can conduce to but one result.

Meanwhile, simple-hearted John Brancker and his equally simple-hearted sister looked on complacently happy in the happiness of the young people, and leaving the future, if they ever took it into consideration at all, to solve its own problems.

One morning Frank awoke to the fact that he was of age ; he also about the same time awoke to the knowledge of another pleasant fact, to wit, that he was in love with Hermia Rivers. He was quite persuaded that Hermia was necessary to his happiness. Still, he was in no hurry to declare his passion. There was a vein of cool calculation under his laughing, happy-go-lucky exterior, the existence of which few people except his mother were aware of, or even suspected.

He could afford to bide awhile, he told himself. Hermia was safe, there was no other Romeo in the field ; he had but to speak the word in order at once, as with a harlequin's wand, to change her placid, bread-and-butter, sisterly liking into a feeling infinitely more pas-

sionate and delightful, of which he was to be the centre and focus, and which was to render his life beautiful with the incense it would never tire of showering round his path. What he was to give in return for all this he did not condescend to explain even to himself. The awkwardness of it was that his present salary at the Bank was only ninety pounds a year. From that sum it would rise by yearly increments of ten pounds till it reached a hundred and fifty pounds, at which point it would stop until the chance should offer itself of his stepping into some senior clerk's shoes; a chance, however, which might not come to him for an indefinite number of years.

After all, a hundred and fifty pounds a year was a beggarly amount on which to marry, and to secure even that limited happiness he would have six years still to wait. Of course, considering the relationship between them, Mr. Avison ought to do something more for him—ought to shove him on specially over the heads of some of the other fellows, or, in any case, give him a thumping advance in place of a paltry ten pounds. It was an awful shame that he, a blood relation, should be treated no differently from the veriest stranger, and that he should even have to knuckle under, as far as position in the office went, to that cad of an Ephraim Judd!

Among Frank's manifold acquaintances was a young man of the name of Winton, who had at one time been a clerk in Avison's Bank, but had since accepted a better-paid situation in Umpleby's Bank at Dulminster. Winton came over once or twice a month to Ashdown to see his relatives, on which occasions he and Derison generally contrived to have an hour or two together at their favorite billiards.

Said Winton on one occasion, nearly a year before the time of which we are now writing :

"I'm going to tell you a secret, old man, which you may or may not make use of to your own advantage. That will be for you to decide when you've heard it ;

only, you must first give me your sacred word of honor never to mention it to a soul."

Frank gave the required promise without difficulty.

"I know you often visit at John Brancker's," resumed the other, "and report has it that you're sweet on that pretty niece of his. Small blame to you, if you are, say I. However, if you're not, perhaps you'll think it advisable to be so when I whisper to you that in our books at Umpleby's the very nice little sum of twelve hundred pounds is at the present moment standing to the credit of Miss Hermia Rivers."

"Winton, you must be dreaming," was all Derison could say, so extreme was his astonishment.

"Not a bit of it, my boy. I've seen the account with my own eyes. Its been accumulating for years, at the rate of eighty pounds per annum. John comes over once a quarter, as regular as clockwork, bringing twenty pounds with him at each visit. The probability is that he banks with us in order that none of Avison's people may know anything of the affair."

"But are you quite sure that the account stands in the name of Miss Rivers, and of no one else?" asked Frank after a pause, during which he had been trying to digest his friend's startling information.

"Of course I'm sure. Hermia Rivers, and that alone, is the name in our ledger. I suppose honest John, having no children of his own, is investing his savings, or some portion of them, for the benefit of his niece. He'll be a lucky fellow that gets Miss Hermy for a wife. If I wasn't engaged already, hang me if I wouldn't have a cut-in on my own account."

It did not take Frank long to make up his mind what he ought to do; the duty he owed to himself lay clearly before him. He would propose to Hermy without a day's delay. He had loved her all along, but he felt that she was dearer, far dearer, to him now than ever she had been before.

CHAPTER V.

EPHRAIM JUDD CUTS HIS HAND.

EPHRAIM JUDD was the victim of an insatiable curiosity with regard to the affairs of other people. To pry into the private business and personal histories of his fellow clerks, and of those with whom he was brought into contact in business, was with him a sort of mania. He had a special bunch of keys, procured it would be impossible to say how, which gave him access to nearly every drawer in the office ; and many an evening when he stayed after the other clerks had gone, and was supposed to be busily at work, he was, in reality, engaged in prying into private correspondence, and other matters with which he had no manner of concern. It was not that the knowledge thus surreptitiously obtained was of any value to him, or was made use of to the detriment of those from whom it was stolen ; it was simply hoarded up in his memory, where so much useless knowledge was stored up already, doubtless greatly to the satisfaction of his curiosity, which was the sole end he had in view. He was stopping to-night after John Brancker's departure because, in the course of the day, John had received a letter by post, the contents of which had seemed to puzzle him greatly, and Ephraim was hungering to know what the letter could possibly be about. After reading the letter two or three times, and wrinkling his brows over it, John had put it away in one of his drawers, and Ephraim was in the hopes of finding it there now.

John Brancker had not been gone more than ten minutes before Ephraim wiped his pen and laid it down. Then he sat perfectly still for a few moments, listening intently with those large, flexible ears of his. Nothing was to be heard save, now and then, the footsteps of someone passing in the street. With a hop and a skip,

Ephraim was off his stool and at the door. Long practice had enabled him to turn the handle noiselessly. Holding the door half open, he waited and listened again. Sweet was probably downstairs getting his supper. A moment later Ephraim was on one knee against Mr. Hazeldine's door, and peering through the keyhole. In his india rubber overshoes he moved without a sound. He kept his eye to the keyhole for about a couple of minutes, and then he went back noiselessly to his own office.

"He doesn't seem to have much to do that need keep him so late," muttered Ephraim to himself. "I wonder what he's thinking about. He's got something on his mind, I'm positive he has. He's not the same man he was half a year ago."

While speaking thus he drew from one of his pockets a steel ring, on which were strung about a dozen keys. Selecting one of them, he inserted it into the lock of John Brancker's drawer, which it opened as easily as the proper key could have done. A crafty smile lighted up Ephraim's thin, sallow face as his fingers gripped the handle of the drawer. He pulled, but the drawer stuck and would only open to the extent of a few inches. A little patience would have remedied this, but Ephraim was in a hurry; Obed Sweet might come his rounds at any moment, so into the drawer went his long, lean fingers in search of the letter.

Now, John Brancker was in the habit of using a quill pen nearly as often as he used a steel one, and in his drawer was an office-knife, almost as sharp as a razor, which he used for the making and mending of the former. Ephraim never thought about the knife till his hand came in contact with the blade, a gash being the immediate result. He drew back his hand with an exclamation of pain, but not till the contents of the drawer had been sprinkled with sundry drops of blood. At this moment Sweet's premonitory cough was audible, and then the door was opened, and his head protruded

into the room. Ephraim was obliged to stand still and let his wounded hand hang by his side.

"Not gone yet, sir?" said Sweet.

"No, but I'm just about done, and shall be off in a few minutes," answered Mr. Judd.

"All right, sir," responded Sweet. "The Guv'nor seems as if he was going to stick at it late to-night," he added. And with that he went on to talk of the weather, and lingered for fully five minutes before he finally went.

Looking down, Ephraim saw with dismay that there was quite a little pool of blood on the floor by this time. He had no means of cleaning it up, and was utterly at a loss what to do. He tied his handkerchief round his hand, and stood thinking for a minute or two. At length he decided that he would leave the floor as it was for to-night, and come to the Bank an hour earlier than usual in the morning, when the woman who cleaned the offices would be at work. He would give her sixpence, and with her soft soap and scrubbing-brush she would quickly efface the stains from the floor; or, if by chance any signs still remained, a little ink spilled carefully over the place would effectually hide them. Five minutes by daylight would suffice to so re-arrange the contents of the drawer, that John, who was the most unsuspicious of mortals, would never find out that they had been disturbed. Having thus decided on his plan, Ephraim proceeded to re-lock the drawer, then he put on his overcoat, muffler and hat, and took possession of his stick, after which he turned off the gas. At the door he paused to listen, but all was silent.

About half way along the main corridor, and nearly opposite the door of Mr. Hazeldine's office, was a spiral, iron staircase which gave access to certain upper rooms used as storerooms for old books and papers transferred from the offices below. Up this staircase mounted Ephraim Judd till he reached a certain height, and then he paused. Over Mr. Hazeldine's door was a fanlight

which could be used as a ventilator if so required. From his perch on the stairs Ephraim could see through the fanlight into the interior of the office. He could see, too, as previous experience had taught him, Mr. Hazeldine's table as well as Mr. Hazeldine himself, if that gentleman happened to be seated at it. He was so seated now, and for a space of about a dozen seconds Ephraim's eyes seemed as though they would transfix him. "What can he be after? What is he going to do?" he muttered to himself in genuine surprise, and with somewhat of a scared look on his face.

But there was no time for further prying. He heard Sweet's footsteps ascending the stairs from the lower premises. Half a minute later, and he had opened one of the big outer doors and had let himself into the street. He set off homeward in a more thoughtful mood than ordinary. Twice he turned to look at the lighted windows of Mr. Hazeldine's office. With the exception of them and the fanlight over the main entrance, the building was in darkness; Sweet's rooms in the basement having windows that looked the opposite way.

His tea was waiting for him when he reached home. After he had partaken of it he sat awhile, puzzling himself over a chess problem in a magazine; then he decided that he would go for a walk. He had not gone far before John Brancker nearly ran against him at the corner of a street.

"Hallo! Mr. B., whoever thought of meeting you at this time of night?" cried Ephraim.

"I'm on my road to William Strong's," answered John. "I hear that he's ill, and I'm doubtful whether he will be able to attend to the organ next Sunday. That was a spot of rain. Now that I'm so near the Bank, I may as well step in and get my umbrella, which I forgot to bring away this evening. Sweet will hardly have shut up for the night yet."

Ephraim's heart sank within him. Should John light the gas in the office, he would infallibly discover the

bloodstains on the floor, and his doing so would lead to inquiry ; but all he said aloud was :

" I daresay you will find Mr. H. still in his office."

Then the two men bade each other good-night, and John turned off towards the Bank.

Ephraim turned off too, but only to take another road which led to the Bank a little further on. He strode along with his stick and overshoes, making no noise as he went. Coming to a dark corner within sight of the Bank, he halted there and was just in time to see John go in. Mr. Hazeldine's office was still lighted up. Ephraim stood and watched with a beating heart. Would John light the gas, or would he not? His anxiety was of short duration. In three minutes John was out of the Bank again with his umbrella in his hand. He had found it in the dark. Ephraim breathed a sigh of relief, and then slunk further into his corner till John's footsteps had died away. The clock of St. Mary's Church was chiming the half-hour past ten as he turned up the street again.

From ten o'clock at night till six o'clock in the morning it was Obed Sweet's duty to perambulate the Bank premises once an hour and satisfy himself that everything was safe. At six o'clock Mrs. Sweet rose and got her husband's breakfast ready, after which Sweet generally went to bed for four or five hours. At seven o'clock Peggy Lown, who assisted Mrs. Sweet to clean the offices, rang and was admitted.

John Brancker had not been gone more than three or four minutes after fetching his umbrella when Obed Sweet came slowly up from the lower regions with the intention of locking up the premises for the night. He had heard, as he fancied, the front door clash, and he never doubted that it was Mr. Hazeldine who had gone home at last. Mr. Brancker had let himself in with his pass-key, of which he and Mr. Hazeldine each possessed one, and Sweet had not heard him enter. Feeling sure that Mr. Hazeldine was no longer there, Obed opened

the door of the private office without any preliminary knock. He was quite startled at finding the "Guv'nor" still there, and the latter was evidently just as much startled at being so suddenly intruded upon. He put something away hastily into a drawer, and turned an ashen face on the night-watchman.

"Ah, Sweet, I did not hear you knock," he said in a faint, weary voice, very unlike his usual decisive way of speaking.

"Beg pardon, sir," answered Sweet, in a flurry, "but I made sure that I heard you go out about five minutes since."

"I shall be about half an hour yet. I will let myself out when I am ready. I suppose everyone else has gone?"

"Yes, sir; some time ago."

"That will do. You need not trouble further."

Sweet retired and shut the door very gently. Then he stood on the mat for a few moments, rubbing his nose thoughtfully.

"I could a' sworn I heard somebody shut the front door," he muttered; "and yet Mr. Judd went away more than an hour ago. I suppose I'm getting old and stoopid."

He tried the front door and found it fast. Then he opened the door of the general office and peeped in, but all was darkness there. Satisfied that he must have been mistaken, Sweet made his way downstairs to his cosy little room and lighted his pipe. His wife had gone to bed by this time, and he sat for nearly an hour, smoking and sipping occasionally at his mug of beer, and listening for the sounds of Mr. Hazeldine's departure. But Sweet's listening was in vain; no sound broke the silence. By-and-bye he put his pipe down and finished his beer. The room was warm and the ale was old; Sweet's eyelids drooped, shut, opened and shut again: the night-watchman was asleep. This was no uncommon occurrence during his long, lonely vigils; but

he had a happy knack of waking up, alert and fresh, at the end of about half an hour. So it was in the present instance. Sweet awoke with a start and a shiver. The fire had burned low, and the clock pointed to half-past eleven. "The Guv'nor must surely have gone by this time," he said to himself, as he got up and yawned. Then he lighted his lantern and went upstairs.

Placing his lantern on one of the chairs in the corridor, he went to the door of Mr. Hazeldine's room and knocked. He was not going to make a breach in his manners again. But there came no response. He waited a few seconds, and then he opened the door and looked in. Everything was in darkness, as he had expected it would be; both the gas and the fire were out. Sweet shut and locked the door, the key being outside. Then he bolted and barred the heavy front door, and after a final glance into the other offices, he locked them also. His last act was to extinguish the gas in the corridor, after which his duties were over for another hour.

Next morning, a few minutes before seven o'clock, Peggy Lown rang the bell and was duly admitted by Mrs. Sweet. It was Peggy's duty to clean the two general offices and the passage, while Mrs. Sweet herself looked after Mr. Hazeldine's and Mr. Avison's rooms. The first thing Peggy did was to draw up the blinds and let more daylight in through the heavily-barred windows. She had got her broom and her pail of water and was about to set to work, when her eye was caught by a splash of something dark on the floor. She stooped to examine it more closely. Was it nothing more than some red ink which had been spilled, or was it blood? Peggy shuddered involuntarily. At this moment she heard Mrs. Sweet's cough in the corridor, so she went and beckoned to her and brought her in and pointed out the stain on the floor without a word.

Mrs. Sweet stooped as Peggy had done. "It's blood!"

she exclaimed next moment, and the two women looked at each other in mute questioning.

Peggy was the first to speak.

"Look at these red finger-marks on this drawer," she said.

"Why, that's Mr. Brancker's drawer! What can it all mean?" queried Mrs. Sweet.

Peggy shook her head.

"Perhaps the gentleman has only cut his finger," she ventured to suggest.

Mrs. Sweet brightened up.

"That must be it; it sent me all of a shake, though, when I set eyes on it," she said.

"I shall have some trouble in getting them stains out," remarked Peggy. "I should have thought such a particular gentleman as Mr. Brancker might have tied his handkercher round his finger."

But Mrs. Sweet had gone, being in a hurry to get on with her own share of the work.

Peggy drew back the fender and fireirons, and was on the point of sweeping up the hearth, when she was startled by a piercing shriek. "Lord a' mercy! What's that?" she cried, as she let her brush fall and ran out into the corridor. The door of Mr. Hazeldine's room was open. She rushed in. Half way across the floor lay the body of Mrs. Sweet in a dead faint. A few yards further away lay another body, that of Mr. Hazeldine, cold and stark. Not far from it, gleaming brightly in the morning light, lay a long-bladed, murderous-looking knife.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DISCOVERY.

ST. MARY's clock was chiming half-past seven when Ephraim Judd, suddenly turning the corner of a street on his way to the Bank, all but ran against Peggy Lown. She was the very woman he was coming thus

early to see. He wanted her to get the office floor washed before John Brancker should arrive ; but the sight of her white, scared face sent a sudden thrill of terror to his heart. Was anything suspected ? Had anything been discovered ? were his mental queries, thinking of himself alone.

"Oh, Mr. Judd, thank heaven I've met you !" cried Peggy, with a great gasp. "Run to the Bank, sir. There's been murder—murder ! Poor Mr. Hazeldine ——" But here Peggy caught sight of a policeman at the top of the street, and hurried off without a word more.

Mr. Hazeldine murdered ! Ephraim Judd caught hold of a garden railing to keep himself from falling. For a moment or two the street and its houses faded away, and he was looking through the fanlight again, as on the previous night. A boy stopped and stared curiously at him ; then Ephraim's wits came back. A few rapid strides brought him to the Bank. One of the heavy doors was open, left so by Peggy Lown. Ephraim passed through, and made at once for Mr. Hazeldine's room. He took in the scene at a glance. Mrs. Sweet had had some water thrown over her, and showed signs of returning consciousness. Sweet himself, only partially dressed, was kneeling on one knee a foot or two away from the murdered man. He had tried to lift up the body, but had been compelled to let it drop again, and now he was staring at it as though he could not believe the evidence of his senses. A short distance away lay the knife—no one would touch that till the police arrived. And then Ephraim saw something else which Sweet in his perturbation had failed to notice ; the iron door which opened into the strong room was partially open. Had there been robbery as well as murder ?

Mr. Hazeldine was lying on his face, with one arm under his head, and the other outstretched, the hand of the latter being clenched as if in a spasm of mortal

in, accompanied by Peggy, and folk at some distance by a crowd of some half-dozen in the street, who felt sure that it must be a murder at the least, and that, by good luck, it might be murder as well.

Mrs. Sweet was sitting up by the light round in a dazed sort of way. The constable roused her. She put her hands to her face at her drenched cap and hair. "What a look! I wish I had my other cap on!" she thought in her mind. Then she wiped her face and hid her saturated head-dress with her hands, a touch of comedy which is seldom absent from the grimmest of human tragedies.

The constable advanced without a word, and with the body of the dead man over on its back. His vest was unbuttoned, the ends of his shirt hanging loose, and his collar had appeared to have been torn from the studs by some sharp instrument. In the front had been cut by some sharp instrument in the region of the heart, a small red place.

"He's dead enough, poor gentleman!"

door divided for a moment, and in came Mr. Chief Constable Mace attended by one of his men and Dr. Barton.

The idlers were driven out, and the front door was shut and bolted. The news had spread, and already some half-hundred people had assembled outside the Bank. Those inside were waiting for the first words of Dr. Barton. Not long had they to wait.

"He has been dead for several hours, probably since midnight, or even earlier," was the verdict. Then he asked that a table might be brought in from some other room, and the body be laid upon it.

The knife was in Mr. Mace's possession by this time. He showed it to the doctor.

"Yes, it looks like it, but we shall know better before long," said the latter. He was taking off his coat and rolling up his shirt-sleeves. Sweet, who was trembling like a jelly, had gone with one of the constables to fetch a table.

"It seems to me as if there has been robbery as well as murder," said Mr. Judd, in a whisper to the chief constable, as he pointed to the open door of the strong room.

Mr. Mace nodded.

"You know the premises, Mr. Judd," he said. "Suppose you and I have a look."

The strong room was in darkness except for a sickly gleam of daylight which penetrated through the small grated opening in the outer wall, but Ephraim struck a match and lighted the gas. The door of one of the three iron safes, the one in which bullion was always kept, was wide open. Apparently the safe had been rifled. Strewn about the floor were a number of documents, three or four empty cash-bags, and some books. There, too, open and empty, lay the black leather bag which had contained the twelve hundred pounds brought by Mr. Hazeldine from London the previous afternoon.

"It looks as if somebody had been here that had no right to," said Mr. Mace.

"It does indeed," assented Ephraim. "I think we ought to have Mr. Brancker here as soon as possible."

"Right you are ; and there's the poor gentleman's relations to be told. Who's to do that ?"

"I will go and break the news to Mr. Clement—that's the doctor—if you like, and then he can tell the others."

"Do so, please ; and could you not call on Mr. Brancker at the same time ?"

"He lives in an opposite direction. One of your men might fetch him in ten minutes. By-the-bye, I shouldn't be a bit surprised if Mr. B. was the last person who saw the Governor alive."

"Ah ; in that case the sooner we have him here the better. But what reason have you for saying so ?"

"Why, I met him about half-past ten last night on his way to the Bank. He said that he was coming to fetch his umbrella, but he may have seen Mr. H. at the same time."

"Um! Well, we shall hear what he has to say when he arrives."

"No doubt Sweet can tell you more of the matter than I can."

In speaking thus of Mr. Brancker, Ephraim had no ulterior motive, nor did it strike him at the time that his words might be the means of placing John in a very awkward position.

Two more constables had arrived by now. Mr. Mace planted one of them at the door of the strong room.

"Don't let anyone enter here without my permission," he said. The other man he sent in search of Mr. Brancker, while Mr. Judd left the Bank at the same time to break the news to Clement Hazeldine. At the doctor's wish Mrs. Sweet and Peggy had retired. They would be required later on, but at present they were only in the way.

"There seems to have been robbery here as well as

murder," said Mr. Mace to Sweet. "I suppose you have no idea how it has all come about?"

Sweet had recovered his faculties in some measure by this time. Sorry though he was for Mr. Hazeldine, he yet felt that he himself must of necessity be a personage of some note for a considerable time to come. Now that he had partly recovered from his first fright, he was beginning to swell with a sense of self-importance, and he proceeded to put on his most official air, and began to enter into a long, rambling statement which might have lasted for half an hour had he not been sharply pulled up.

"Tut-tut, man, can't you answer a plain question in a few plain words?" said Mr. Mace, impatiently. "Do you, or do you not, know anything of this affair?"

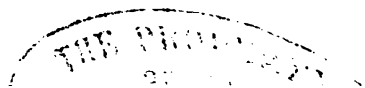
"No, I don't," answered Sweet, shortly, and very red in the face.

"I thought as much," said Mr. Mace, dryly. "In these cases the person one would naturally expect to know the most is nearly sure to know the least. But, don't be afraid, my good man; you will have an opportunity of telling all you know before long. Meanwhile, the less you say the better, except when you are asked a question by those who have a right to know."

Mr. Mace mounted a chair, and examined the iron bars which protected the two windows of the office. There was nothing the matter with them. Evidently no entrance had been effected that way.

"And now you and I will take a little walk round the premises," said Mr. Mace to Obed; so away they went, the latter ungraciously enough, although he was in a dreadful state of puzzle as to how anyone could possibly have made his way into the Bank overnight, and left it again without his knowledge.

The front door was first of all examined, and afterwards the back door, which opened into a small paved yard, shut in by a high wall protected by revolving iron spikes. There was nothing about either of them to



show that they had been tampered with in any way. The two men went next into the general office, where everything seemed in its usual state, and from that they passed into the inner office. Here Mr. Mace's sharp eyes seemed drawn as if by instinct to the blood-stains on the floor.

"Ha! What are these? Who has been here?" he said.

"God bless my heart! I know no more about 'em than you do, sir!" cried Sweet, beginning once more to quake like a jelly.

"These are the marks of blood," said Mr. Mace, gravely. "And here are finger-marks of a similar kind outside this drawer."

"Why, that is one of Mr. Brancker's drawers," said Sweet.

"One of Mr. Brancker's drawers, hey? Does that gentleman keep any money in it, do you know?"

"Oh, no, sir; that's not one of the cash drawers; and, besides, the money's all put away in the strong room at night."

Mr. Mace made a careful examination of the rest of the office, but discovered nothing further out of the ordinary way. He then locked the two doors that opened into the office, and put the keys in his pocket. He and Sweet were just crossing the corridor when John Brancker, pale and breathless, came hurriedly in.

"This terrible tale, that I have just heard, cannot be true, Mr. Mace," he said.

"Only too true, I am sorry to say, Mr. Brancker. Come and see for yourself," answered the chief constable, and he led the way into Mr. Hazeldine's office.

The body had been covered with a sheet, and Doctor Barton was in the act of putting on his overcoat. He shook hands with Mr. Brancker, whom he had known for years. John's glance traveled from the table with its terrible burden to the doctor's face, and then tears rushed to his eyes. It seemed all like a hideous dream.

"We can do no more at present," said the doctor to Mr. Mace. "There will have to be a 'post-mortem,' of course; but that, I apprehend, will merely serve to verify what we know pretty well already. The tissue of the heart has doubtless been punctured by some sharp instrument—probably by the knife in your possession—and death must have been almost instantaneous."

"But who can have done it?" asked John, in a stupor of horror and grief. He lifted a corner of the sheet, and gazed for a moment on the well-known face, on which there now rested such an awful calm, while the firm-set lips gave John the impression of keeping back by main force some grim secret, untold in life and now frozen into silence for ever.

"That's just what we would all like to know," answered Mr. Mace, dryly.

"There was a light in his office when I called for my umbrella about half-past ten," said John.

"But did you see Mr. Hazeldine, and speak to him at that time?" asked Mace.

"No, I never saw him at all yesterday evening. He did not get back from London till late, and I would not disturb him."

"Then it must have been you, sir, that I heard going out about that time," said Sweet.

"Most probably. I let myself in with my pass-key, found my umbrella in the dark, and was out of the Bank again in three minutes."

"And I came upstairs when I heard the door bang, thinking it was Mr. Hazeldine who had gone," said Sweet. "I was quite dumbfounded when I opened the office-door and saw him sitting there in his chair. 'I shall not be done for about half an hour yet,' says he. 'I will let myself out when I'm ready. You needn't trouble any more, Sweet.' So with that I went, leaving him sitting there. Little did I think——"

"Never mind what you thought; tell us what happened next," said Mr. Mace.

"What happened next was that I went downstairs and got my supper," responded Sweet, with a resentful glance at the chief constable. "After that I sat and had a pipe, waiting to hear Mr. Hazeldine go, that I might lock up for the night."

Sweet paused and rubbed his nose with his forefinger.

"But you never heard him go, hey?" queried Mace.

"No, I never heard him go. I waited till half-past eleven, and then I went upstairs again."

"Perhaps you had a little snooze meanwhile," said Mace, insinuatingly.

"Me go to sleep when I'm on dooty!" exclaimed Sweet, with an indignant sniff. "No, sir, I'm not one of that sort, and nobody ever hinted at such a thing before."

"I am glad to hear it. But tell us what happened when you came upstairs for the second time."

"Not caring to disturb Mr. Hazeldine again if he was still there, I peeped through the keyhole to see whether there was a light, but I couldn't see one. Still, to make sure, I knocked, but there was no answer, so I opened the door and looked in. Everything was in darkness; the gas was out and the fire was out. Says I to myself, 'He's gone;' and with that I locked the door on the outside, feeling sure that everything was right."

"But ought not the fact of your not having heard Mr. Hazeldine leave the premises have caused you to suspect that something was wrong?"

"Mr. Hazeldine was a very quiet gentleman. He would shut the front door and make hardly any noise about it. Mr. Brancker here, begging his pardon for saying so, generally bangs the door after him."

"What did you do when you found, as you thought, that Mr. Hazeldine was gone?"

"I did what I always do—I put out the gas in the lobby and fastened up the front door for the night, and

then went the rest of my rounds to see that everything was right."

"How often in the course of the night are you supposed to go your rounds?"

"Once every hour; and I'm not only supposed to go 'em, but do go 'em."

"And you neither saw nor heard anything last night out of the ordinary way—nothing, in fact, to make you suspicious that anything was wrong?"

"Nothing whatever. I was as comfortable in my mind when I turned into bed between six and seven this morning as ever I was in my life."

"The inference would seem to be that the crime was committed between the hours of half-past ten and half past eleven," said Mace. "But that is a point which will have to be inquired into more minutely later on." Then turning to John, he added, "You, Mr. Brancker, will probably be able to tell us whether there has been robbery here as well as murder," and beckoning him to follow, he led the way into the strong room.

CHAPTER VII.

WHO DID IT?

"Yes, there has certainly been foul play here as well as in the other room," said John Brancker, after a brief examination of the strong room. "In the first place, the twelve hundred pounds are gone which Mr. Hazeldine fetched from London yesterday, and I have no doubt that there were cash and notes to the amount of three or four thousand pounds in the safe, which also seem to be missing. The exact sum I cannot, of course, tell till I have examined the books. Of this safe Mr. Hazeldine himself always kept the key. The other safes in the cellar are under my charge. I must at once send a telegram to Mr. Avison, who is staying for a few days in Paris on his way home."

"That's an ugly bruise, Mr. Brancker, just above your left eye," said the chief constable, gazing straight into the other's face.

"Yes ; it is the result of a little accident last night," answered John, indifferently. "A woman flung a stone at me. I suppose I shall be disfigured for a few days ; but it might have been worse."

"If you will step this way for a moment, there is something I should like to ask you about," said Mace, and with that he led the way to the inner office, Dr. Barton and Sweet bringing up the rear. Mace unlocked the door and they all went in. "Can you explain how those marks came there ?" asked the constable, pointing to the stains on the floor.

"Good gracious, no !" cried John with a start. "I know no more about them than you do"—which was precisely the remark Sweet had given utterance to. "And there are more marks outside my drawer ! What can it all mean ?"

"It may, perhaps, be as well to open the drawer, if you have the key about you."

John produced his bunch of keys at once. "This is the one," he said, handing the bunch to Mace. "Perhaps you had better open the drawer yourself."

The constable took the key and opened the drawer. The books and papers were marked here and there with drops of blood. John stared as he had never stared before. "Someone has been here to a certainty," he said. The books and papers have been disturbed, and as for those stains——" He was too agitated to say more.

"And yet the lock does not seem to have been tampered with," said Mace, with his keen eyes again fixed on John's face.

"It's all a mystery, and I can throw no light on it whatever," answered the latter.

"Can you call to mind the last occasion of your having to open the drawer ?"

"It was when I put my papers away last evening

before leaving ; that would be sometime between eight and nine o'clock."

"Then you did not open the drawer when you came back to the Bank at half-past ten?"

"Certainly not. I had no occasion to do so. I did not even light the gas, but searched for and found my umbrella in the dark. I was not more than two minutes in the office."

"I shall have to keep this office locked up till the jury have visited it," said Mace. "I have no doubt the Coroner will be able to sit this afternoon."

John looked at him for a moment as though he hardly understood his meaning ; then following Mace's lead, they all left the office, the door of which was carefully re-locked. They had just got back to the other office when Clement Hazeldine rushed in, white and breathless.

Although lame, Ephraim Judd, with the assistance of his stick, could get over the ground as quickly as most people, and it did not take him many minutes to reach Clement Hazeldine's door. Clem lodged with the widow of the practitioner to whose business he had succeeded. He was still in bed when Ephraim knocked, having been attending a patient till four A. M. ; but the summons sent upstairs was so peremptory that he lost no time in coming down. In what words Ephraim told his terrible tidings he never afterwards knew ; it is sufficient that they were told.

"What about your brother?" asked Ephraim, as soon as Clement seemed in some measure to be recovering from the shock. "Ought he not to know as soon as possible?"

"Will you please go and tell him, Mr. Judd, while I go down to the Bank? There's my mother and sister, too; but Edward must break the news to them. It seems impossible that it can be true—impossible to

in his mind as he walked along. tainty that during his absence M the blood-stains on the office fl terribly afraid lest, by some mean be traced back to him. He did could be, but his conscience ma He had taken away the knife that it was now locked up in his trunk itself, although it had bled a good not proved a severe one. It wa hand, and he had covered it with skin to keep the air out. He ma on no account must Mr. Mace's discover the wound.

Edward Hazeldine was an early fasting, he made a point of running correspondence. It was a saving of val just sat down to table with his h him when Mr. Judd was announced that Ephraim was employed at t moment to the conclusion that his the bearer of ill news, and one ; grave face was enough to assure h

Then he bowed his head on his hands, and there was silence in the room for a little while.

But Edward Hazeldine was a man of action ; to sit still for any length of time was for him next to an impossibility. Presently he lifted his head, wiped his eyes, and rang the bell. To the servant who came in, he said :

"Order the mare to be put into the dog-cart and brought round as quickly as possible." Then to Ephraim : "We will drive over to the Bank together as soon as I have given certain instructions to my clerk."

Left alone for a few minutes, Ephraim glanced with curiosity round the handsomely furnished room. He had never been inside Edward Hazeldine's house before. Then his eyes wandered to the breakfast tray, and the little heap of post-letters lying beside it. As has been said already, other people's letters always had an irresistible fascination for Mr. Judd. If he could not see the inside of a letter, he would rather see the outside than not see it at all. His long, thin fingers shut and opened automatically. He half rose from his chair, and one hand went out towards the table. His big ears were on the alert for the slightest sound. Another moment and the letters were in his hands.

He ran them quickly through, noting the post-mark of each, and the handwriting of the addresses. Evidently they were chiefly business communications. But over one of them he paused, looking at it this way and that some half-dozen times.

"I could almost swear that this was the poor Governor's hand, only disguised a bit," he muttered. "Posted in London yesterday, too! That 't' is certainly his, and so is that 'h.' It's his writing, I would wager anything. Now, what could he possibly have to write Mr. Edward about yesterday that he could not tell him to-day? I would give something to know what's inside."

But at this juncture he heard Edward Hazeldine's

Fanny had gone into hysterics. The scene left him almost beyond endurance.

The jury had been summoned for three days. As Edward could be of no further use at present, he had made his escape. He hoped that the Coroner would not think it proper to call him as a witness. Everything at present was conjecture and vague surmise. So far, the police had to be without any clue to the perpetrator of the crime.

Edward had not been home more than a few days when Lord Elstree was announced.

His lordship was one of two sleeping partners in the brewery, having about ten thousand pounds invested in the concern. He was on excellent terms with the brewer, of whose business abilities he had a high opinion. His home for three parts of the year was at Seaham Lodge, a splendid property some five miles from Beecham. His family were all married and the sons out in the world, but with himself and his wife, as compared with the ladyship, there lived a distant kinswoman, Merton by name, whom Edward Hazeldine had made up his mind to win for his wife, if it were possible.

whisper no word of love in Miss Winterton's ear ; but there may have been that in his looks and manner which afforded her some inkling of the state of affairs. If such were the case, her treatment of Edward was not of a kind to lead him to fear that when the time should have come for him to urge his suit, he would be very hardly treated. He told himself that he would wait till after Christmas ; till the year's balance at the brewery should have been struck. Business was going up by "leaps and bounds," and he wanted to secure not merely Miss Winterton's approval of his suit, but the Earl's as well, and he knew that nothing would put the latter into such a good humor as the assurance of a thumping dividend on his investment in the brewery.

"My dear Hazeldine, what is this terrible rumor that has just reached my ears?" said his Lordship, as he came hurriedly into the room and held out his hand to the other. "Surely, surely there can be no truth in it!"

He was a short, podgy, sandy-haired man, with a fresh complexion and a tip-tilted nose, and looked far more like a retired tradesman than a "belted Earl." In one respect, indeed, he would have made a first-rate tradesman ; in him the commercial instinct was very strongly developed, and half his time was given to the consideration of schemes by means of which his large income might be made larger still.

"My father was murdered last night, if that is the rumor to which your Lordship refers," answered Edward, with a little break in his voice.

The Earl sat down and stared at the other for a full half minute without speaking. Then he said, "If not too painful to you, I should like you to tell me such particulars of the affair as are already known."

This Edward proceeded to do as briefly as possible.

"It is terrible—terrible!" ejaculated the Earl. "I need scarcely say, my dear Hazeldine, that you have my most unfeigned sympathy—both you and your mother—in this dreadful affliction. How little we know

not Lausnup is going to ask a quiet
ner, and you were to have been of th

A glow of satisfaction burnt for a
Hazeldine's cheeks. Even at a time
could not help feeling a keen sense o
his name should have been remembe
casion. Might he not accept it, he a
augury of the good fortune that woul
the time should have come for him to
terton a certain momentous question

As soon as the Earl had gone, Edw
the heap of unopened letters left the
Business must go on whatever happen
a sense of relief that he endeavored t
back for a time to the commonplace o
life. He took up the letters one by o
read them, and his mind took in th
matically, but his real mind was back
was gazing again on that ghastly, upst
sightless eyes into which no light of
ever flash more. Only last night he h
his father's side, worrying him about
paltry debt of twenty pounds, hardly
and careworn he looked

father's writing. He was startled, to say the least. His father had not written to him since he was a school-boy, unless it was now and then two lines of invitation to dinner, or on some equally trivial matter. What could he possibly have to say to him now? Before beginning to read the letter, he took up the envelope again and saw that it bore the London post-mark of the day before; then he turned to the signature as if to make sure that it really was his father's writing. Then he drew his chair a little nearer the window and began to read.

CHAPTER VIII.

MR. HAZELDINE'S LETTER.

THE following is a copy of Mr. Hazeldine's letter to his son :

Oct. 5, 18—,

"MY DEAR EDWARD,

"When these lines reach you, he who writes them will be no longer among the living. The end of my days is at hand. I am about to go hence, and be no more seen.

"Three months ago I consulted two eminent London specialists with reference to the state of my health. For some time I had had reason to believe that my heart was seriously affected, but I had shrank from turning doubt into certainty. At length, however, I did so, and the verdict proved to be little more than a confirmation of my own secret fears. Both the men I consulted gave me to understand that, with great care, I might live for some time to come, but that there was a possibility of my being taken off at any moment. Rest and perfect quiet were essential to my case, and a complete release from the cares and worries of business—all of which you will say might have been mine had I so willed it—and indeed it is quite true that I might have

retired to some restful spot, and there, 'far from the madding crowd,' have eked out the poor remainder of my days, but for certain circumstances which rendered such a step an impossibility. What those circumstances were, I will now tell you.

"Edward, from youth upward I have been a gambler—a secret gambler—but so well have I kept the knowledge to myself that not even your mother has known of it, whatever she may have suspected. When I was a school-boy I used to gamble for halfpence. When I grew older I was in the habit of venturing my half-crowns, and afterwards my sovereigns, on this race or the other. When I was a young man, and supposed to be taking my autumn holidays in Scotland or at the seaside, I generally contrived to find my way to Doncaster for the St. Leger; and over and over again I have gone through the whole gamut of a gambler's hopes, fears, exultations, and despair.

"Of late years, however, I have given up having anything to do with the Turf, and have confined myself to transactions on the Stock Exchange. Three years ago I was worth twenty thousand pounds: to-day I am a ruined man. I wanted to turn my twenty thousand into fifty, and it seemed so easy to do it that I had not the courage to withhold my hand. Even now I have faith to believe that I could retrieve my fortunes were time given me to do so, but time is the one thing I can no longer call my own. The anxieties of the last few months have told terribly upon me, and I feel that the end may come at any moment. Besides which, Mr. Avison will be at home in the course of a few days.

"You may, perhaps, ask in what way the return of Mr. Avison can affect me, unless it serve to transfer some of the cares of business from my shoulders to his, and, in so far, prove a source of relief to me. But, Edward, I dare not meet him! When I tell you this, you will know what I mean.

"Yes, it is even so. Things that I have been able to

cover up during his absence can be hidden no longer when he returns. I cannot, I dare not face that which would inevitably follow. What a terribly bitter confession is this to make to you, my eldest son !

"What then, is to be done ? How escape a disgrace which seems inevitable ? There is only one mode of escaping from it—by suicide—and that is the mode I have determined to adopt. It is my last and only resource.

"You are aware that, many years ago, I insured my life for twelve thousand pounds. This sum, together with a thousand pounds standing to my credit at the Bank (for I have always contrived to maintain a balance there in order to avoid suspicion), will be nearly all that your mother and sister will have to depend upon after I am gone ; should it, however, be discovered that I have committed suicide, the policy will be forfeited and they will be left little better off than paupers. For this reason, therefore, if for no other, my death must not seem to be the act of my own hand.

"But there is another reason, almost as imperative, why the world must not be allowed to believe that I have put an end to my existence. It must never become known that I dare not face Mr. Avison, and my employer himself must never learn how his most trusted servant has betrayed the confidence reposed in him. The shame, disgrace, and misery in which such knowledge would involve those I leave behind me must be avoided at every risk. There is only one way by which such consequences can be averted, and that is by making my death seem to have resulted, not from my own act, but from the act of another. In brief, the world must be led to believe, not that I have committed suicide, but that I have been murdered !

"You will naturally ask how is such an end to be accomplished ? for in such a case nothing must be left to chance—every step in the affair, every contingency that might arise out of it, must be thought of and

arranged for beforehand. I will tell you what I purpose doing—what, in fact, will actually have been done, to secure the object I have in view, before to-morrow's sunrise.

"In the first place, I have paid off to the uttermost farthing all my losses on the Stock Exchange; and as I have always speculated under an assumed name, there is no risk of its ever becoming known that the respected manager of the Ashdown Bank was the desperate gambler he has been in reality.

"And now for the details of my final arrangements. To-night—for the final act of the tragedy can no longer be delayed, seeing that Mr. Avison is already as far as Paris on his road home—to-night I shall work at the office till after everyone else has gone. I shall put Sweet off his guard. I shall arrange matters so that the door of the bullion safe in the strong room shall be found open, and the safe, to all appearance, rifled of its contents. The booty supposed to have been thus appropriated will amount to something over four thousand pounds, that being the sum in which I am indebted to the Bank. My books will show that latterly the Bank has been accumulating funds in notes and gold to a very considerable amount in order to provide for certain contingencies which it would have to meet before long in the ordinary course of business. As for my worthless self—I shall be found dead on the hearthrug of my office, stabbed to the heart.

"Such is an outline of the programme which will have been carried into effect before these lines meet your eye. In carrying out this desperate resolve I am merely anticipating the end of a life which no power on earth could prolong for many months, and which might go out like the snuff of a candle at any moment. The proceeds of my policy of insurance will be saved to my family, my fair fame will remain untainted, the world will respect my memory as that of a man just and hon-

orable in all his dealings, while those I leave behind me will have no cause to blush for the name they bear.

"Such being the case, why have I chosen to make you my confidant in this matter? Why have I imposed upon you the burthen of such a confession? Why have I not let you live on in ignorance, as your brother will live on in his? I will tell you why.

"Notwithstanding all the precautions I shall take to obviate so untoward a result, it is just possible that my death may be laid at the door of some innocent person. Many a guiltless man has been done to death by circumstantial evidence, and such a thing might easily happen again. I charge you, therefore, as my eldest son, that in the event of anyone being accused of my death, you at once make public such facts as will suffice to free him from so heinous a charge. Better, a thousand times better, that the whole truth should be told, than that the accusation of being a murderer should cling to anyone for an hour! I lay upon you this most solemn duty, being perfectly satisfied that I could entrust it into no better hands. My fervent hope, however, is that no such contingency may arise. Should it do so, your duty will lie plainly before you, and I feel satisfied that you will not shrink from doing it.

"And now, what shall I say more? I dare not write one-twentieth part of that which I feel, for fear I should break down; and I need all the strength I can summon to my aid to go through the ordeal before me. You will continue to be what you have always been—a good son and a good brother. You will treat your father's memory in your thoughts as leniently as you can. I have been weak, foolish—criminal, even; but had fortune smiled on my schemes, all this would have remained unknown, even to you. I should have lived and died prosperous and respected, and the local newspaper, in its obituary notice, would have attributed to me half the virtues under the sun. But should the world ever come to know that which I have here re-

vealed to you, then the colors it would paint me in would be black indeed.

"I can write no more.

"Farewell, a long farewell.

"Your unhappy father,

"JAMES HAZELDINE."

Edward Hazeldine was still sitting with his father's open letter in his hand, in a maze of grief, shame, and perplexity, when there came a knock at his office door. He put the letter carefully out of sight, and then said, "Come in." A servant entered.

"If you please, sir, the Coroner has sent for you, and you are wanted immediately."

The Coroner and jury had met in a room of the "White Lion Hotel," a house not more than two or three hundred yards from the Bank. The twelve good men and true were either tradesmen or private householders of the town, all of whom had known, and most of them had done business with, the late Mr. Hazeldine.

After viewing the body, which still lay in the room where it had been found, the jury went back to the hotel. The proceedings were watched by Mr. Prestwich, solicitor, retained by Mr. Edward Hazeldine, on behalf of the relatives of the deceased. Mr. Mace and three of his men were in attendance.

The first witness called was Clement Hazeldine, who identified the body of the deceased as that of his father.

The next witness was John Brancker, who deposed to deceased having left the Bank during the forenoon of the previous day, with the intention of going to London to change notes to the amount of about twelve hundred pounds for gold. When he left the Bank he took with him the black bag which was always made use of on such occasions. It was not often, witness went on to say, that Mr. Hazeldine himself went to London to obtain change; that was a duty which more frequently

devolved upon him, witness ; still, it sometimes happened that deceased had other business to transact in town, in which case he would bring back the gold himself.

David Measom, the railway booking-clerk, deposed to having sold deceased a first-class return ticket to London and back by the ten-thirty train on the previous day.

Obed Sweet, night-watchman, deposed to the events as detailed in a previous chapter :—To seeing Mr. Hazeldine enter the Bank about half-past eight p. m., carrying his black bag ; to hearing, as he believed, the front door shut about half-past ten, and to finding, to his surprise when he went upstairs, that deceased was still at work ; to waiting until half-past eleven before going upstairs again, and to finding the office at that time in darkness, and Mr. Hazeldine, to all appearance, gone. Witness then went on to state that the noise he had heard about half-past ten had since been accounted for, by the fact of Mr. Brancker having come back to the Bank to fetch his umbrella.

In reply to a question by the Coroner, it was stated that both deceased and Mr. Brancker had pass-keys, by means of which they could let themselves into the Bank after ordinary business hours without troubling Sweet, unless the front door had been finally bolted for the night.

"Does anyone know whether the pass-key belonging to deceased has been found?" asked the Coroner of Mr. Mace.

"It was found in one of his pockets," was the answer.

The next witness was Amanda Sweet, the night-watchman's wife, who deposed to finding the door of Mr. Hazeldine's room locked and the key outside, as it was said to have been left by last witness, when she went at half-past seven a. m. to sweep out and dust the office as usual. The first thing she did was to draw up the blinds, after which, on turning round, she saw the

Mr. Judd a short distance from the him what had happened, and to find a few minutes afterwards.

Ephraim Judd deposed that, in consequence the last witness told him, he hurried to the place and found Sweet and his wife by the door of the Hazeldine.

The evidence of Constable Jeremy effect.

Chief Constable Mace deposed that in consequence a message sent him by the last witness to the Bank, calling on Dr. Barton by the name of that gentleman with him. He then went to the finding of the body, and produced the last witness had picked up and given him, how he had found the door of the strong room was also the door of the bullion-safe in which as Mr. Brancker would tell them, there the safe had been robbed, and notes and a very large amount made away with. He failed to describe how he had made a thorough search of the premises, but without finding any mode by which the perpetrator of the

examined them at his request, would no doubt be prepared to give the jury his opinion about them. In addition, the outside of one of the drawers—Mr. Brancker's drawer, he believed it to be—was smeared in a similiar way, as were also some portion of its contents. He believed Mr. Brancker would tell them that he was utterly at a loss to account for the existence of the marks in question. Before proceeding further in the case he would respectfully suggest that the jury should be requested to examine the stains for themselves.

This course was agreed to ; but it was first deemed advisable to take the evidence of Dr. Barton.

CHAPTER IX.

THE INQUEST.

DR. BARTON, having been sworn, deposed to the fact of deceased having met with his death by violence. His chest had been pierced by some sharp instrument which, in all probability, had penetrated the tissues of the heart ; but that was a point as to which he could not speak positively until after the post-mortem examination. Death, in that case, would have been all but instantaneous. He had examined the weapon produced and compared it with the wound, which it exactly fitted. In his opinion, there was little doubt that the knife in question was the one with which the fatal blow had been inflicted. There had been a certain amount of hemorrhage from the wound, but scarcely as much as might have been expected—a little on the floor, rather more on the clothes of deceased. Death had taken place several hours before he, witness, was called in. He was not prepared to state how many hours before : it might have been five, or it might have been eight or nine ; it was impossible to speak with exactitude. The clothes of the deceased were, to a certain extent, disarranged. His vest was unbuttoned, the ends of his cravat were

hanging loose, his collar had been violently wrenched from the button which had held it, and the wristband of one sleeve of his shirt had been nearly torn away—all indicative of a struggle, however brief, with his assailant. The idea of suicide was one which had never entered his—witness's—mind; had any such theory been advanced, it would have seemed to him altogether untenable.

When the jury had reassembled after their visit to the Bank, Dr. Barton was recalled, and, in reply to a question by the Coroner, stated that, to the best of his belief, and speaking from a merely casual examination, the stains on the floor of the office usually occupied by Mr. Brancker and Mr. Judd had been caused by blood.

John Brancker was then recalled. In answer to various questions, some of which were put by the Coroner, some by the jury, and some by Mr. Prestwich, he deposed as under :

He left the office about nine o'clock, without having seen Mr. Hazeldine after his return from London, although he had understood from Sweet that he was at work in his office. When he, witness, left the office, Mr. Judd was still there. All the other clerks had gone before. On quitting the Bank, he went straight home and did not stir out again till past ten o'clock. He then decided to go and call upon William Strong, the man who blew the organ bellows for him at church. He had heard that Strong was ill, and he wanted to ascertain whether he would be well enough to attend to his duties on Sunday next. He had hardly left home when a few drops of rain began to fall, and he then remembered that he had left his umbrella at the Bank, and determined to call there and get it. On his way to the Bank he encountered Mr. Judd, whom he told what he was going to do. On reaching the Bank he saw that Mr. Hazeldine's office windows were still lighted up. This did not surprise him, knowing, as he did, that Mr. Hazeldine often worked till a late hour. Having let himself

in with his pass-key, he went into the inner room and there found his umbrella in the corner where he had left it. He found it in the dark. He did not go near Mr. Hazeldine, but left the Bank at once without seeing anyone, and went on his way towards Strong's cottage.

Being requested to continue his narrative, and relate what happened afterwards, witness went on to say that on reaching Strong's cottage, although there was a light in one of the windows, no one came in response to his repeated knocking, and that at length he went away, convinced that Strong was not at home. As there seemed no likelihood of more rain, the moon being now shining, he determined to return by way of the foot-path through the meadows by the river. This would take him quite a mile out of his way, but that did not matter as he was in no hurry to reach home. As he was walking through the fields, he heard the sounds of a man and woman quarrelling. As the man seemed to be ill-using the woman, he went a little out of his road to ascertain what was the matter. On coming up to the pair he remonstrated with the man for his behavior, when both he and the woman turned upon him, and demanded to know what right he had to interfere between husband and wife. So enraged was the woman, that she took up a stone and flung it at him, hitting him over the left eye. For a few moments he felt stunned, and by the time he had recovered himself, both the man and the woman had disappeared. St. Mary's clock was striking midnight as he opened the garden gate of his own house.

In reply to a question by the Coroner, witness stated that, in company with Mr. Mace, he had visited the strong room. He had found the door of the bullion safe open, and from the cursory examination, which was all he had yet had time to make, he had no doubt that gold and notes to the amount of between three and four thousand pounds, together with the twelve hundred

pounds' worth of change, had been abstracted from the coffers of the Bank.

"Am I to understand, Mr. Brancker," asked the Coroner, "that you know nothing whatever as to the origin of the bloodstains on the floor of your office, nor of the marks of a similar kind scattered about the contents of your drawer?"

"I know nothing of them whatever, sir, and I was never more surprised in my life than when I saw them there this morning."

"I presume that you locked your drawer before leaving it last evening?"

"To the best of my recollection I did."

"And you found it locked on your arrival this morning?"

"I certainly did. To me the whole affair is utterly inexplicable."

At this juncture, who should shoulder his way into the room but William Strong, the man Mr. Brancker had been so anxious to see the previous evening. Mr. Mace recognized him, and whispered to the Coroner, and next moment, greatly to his surprise, Strong was summoned by name out of the crowd, and sworn by the Coroner's clerk.

"Have you any objection to tell the Court where you were last evening between the hours of half-past ten and half-past eleven?" queried the Coroner.

"I was at home, sir. I've been ill, and have not put foot outside the door for four days till this afternoon."

"Will you swear to that?"

"Of course I will, and my wife will tell you the same thing if you ask her."

"Then if you were at home the whole of last evening, as you state, you could scarcely have failed to hear if anyone knocked at your door?"

"Of course I couldn't, sir; my house ain't like a gentleman's mansion. There's only four rooms in it altogether,"

"Mr. Brancker has just told us that he knocked at your door some time between ten and eleven last night—that he knocked repeatedly, but that nobody answered his summons."

"There must be a mistake somewhere," said Strong, with a puzzled shake of his head. "All I know is that I was never out of the house, and that nobody could have knocked without my hearing them."

"What time did you go to bed last night?"

"At twelve, to the minute—my general time. If I go to bed sooner than that I can't sleep."

"Perhaps Mr. Brancker was mistaken in the house," suggested one of the jury, "and knocked at the wrong door."

"Well, sir, I hardly see how that could happen," said Strong, with a slow, incredulous smile, "seeing that my little shanty ain't one of a row, but stands all by itself."

John Brancker could contain himself no longer. He started to his feet. "Do you mean to say, Strong," he cried, "that you were never out of the house last evening, and yet that you did not hear me knock?"

"I do mean to say so, Mr. Brancker, and what I say is the truth, if these are the last words I ever speak."

"Why, I knocked half-a-dozen times if I knocked once. I was upwards of ten minutes at your door."

Strong could only shake his head. "I can say no more than I've said already," was his answer. "I was never out of the house, and if anybody had knocked I must have heard 'em."

"You may sit down for the present," said the Coroner.

"It is incredible, incredible!" muttered John, as he too resumed his seat. His mind was in a whirl. Was it possible, he asked himself, that he had only dreamed that he called at Strong's cottage, and that he had never been there in reality? But no, that was an impossibility. As well fancy that he had not seen the man and woman quarreling; but there was the bruise on his forehead to prove the reality of that. He looked

round the room, and to his excited fancy it seemed that people were already beginning to gaze askance at him. What were the jury whispering about so earnestly? Surely—surely, they could not for one moment suspect——! No, that would be at once too horrible and too absurd.

To the best of his belief, Strong had sworn to nothing but the truth when he stated that he had never left home during the previous evening, and that it was impossible that Mr. Brancker could have knocked at his door without his being aware of it. It was what Strong believed to be the truth, and yet it was not the whole truth. It was an undoubted fact that he never left the house, but as regards one important feature of the case he had said nothing. He forgot to relate how a certain boon companion of his had called in the course of the evening, bringing with him a bottle of fiery whiskey, and how his friend did not go away till the bottle was empty, leaving Strong, who had eaten little food for several days, in a semi-maudlin state of intoxication.

Mrs. Strong was out at the time, and Strong, left alone before a good fire, and rendered drowsy by the fumes of the liquor, was fast asleep in less than five minutes after his friend had left him. He slept for upwards of an hour, only waking up on his wife's return, but of this sleep his memory retained no recollection whatever next morning. He knew that he had taken a little more to drink than was good for him; but, had he been questioned on the point, he would certainly have denied that he had even as much as closed his eyes till after his wife's return.

Ephraim Judd was recalled by the Coroner. He looked very pale and nervous; but the circumstances of the morning were enough to unnerve any man. He wore a black kid glove on his left hand; in his right hand he carried the other glove loose.

"How long did you stay at the office after Mr. Brancker left you there last evening?"

"Certainly not more than twenty minutes."

"You were the last of the officials to leave the Bank?"

"The last, except Mr. Hazeldine."

"You have seen the blood-stains on the floor of the office where you and Mr. Brancker generally work; you have seen the marks inside the drawer, and the smears outside; have you any knowledge whatever as to how they came there?"

For a moment Ephraim's lips twitched curiously, but the answer when it came was clear and distinct.

"I have no knowledge whatever on the point."

"Did you see or speak to the deceased at all last evening?"

"I neither saw him, nor spoke to him, after his departure for London the previous forenoon."

"Then how do you know that he was at the Bank last evening?"

"Sweet, the night-watchman, told Mr. Brancker and me that he had returned; and I saw that his office was lighted up when I left."

"We have been informed that you met Mr. Brancker accidentally about half-past ten. Tell the jury what passed between you and him on that occasion."

Witness having given him an account of the interview which tallied with John's account, went on to say that after bidding Mr. Brancker good-night, he walked as far as the newsroom, and after sitting there for half an hour he went home to bed.

The Coroner had one more question to put.

"Can you tell the jury of your own knowledge how long Mr. Brancker remained at the Bank after he left you for the purpose of fetching his umbrella?"

Again there was a momentary hesitation before the answer came.

"I did not see Mr. Brancker again after leaving him," was the reply.

The Coroner dismissed him with a nod. Ephraim squeezed his way through the crowd to a quiet corner,

and there wiped his perspiring forehead, and waited while his flurried nerves grew calm again.

Scarcely had Ephraim Judd resumed his seat before Mr. Edward Hazeldine was seen shouldering his way through the crowd at the lower end of the room. People made way for him readily, and he became at once the focus of a hundred eyes. He looked very pale, but the hard, resolute expression of his face was in nowise changed.

"I am sorry to have been obliged to send for you, Mr. Hazeldine," said the Coroner, "but as you were one of the last persons who saw your father alive, I shall require a little formal evidence from you in order to complete the depositions, as far as it is possible to do so to-day."

"I am entirely at your service," said Mr. Hazeldine, who was then sworn in the usual way.

His evidence simply went to prove that deceased had seemed to be in his usual health and spirits on his return from London the previous evening; that he mentioned the fact of his having been to town to obtain the requisite gold for the Bank's requirements on the morrow; and that he also informed witness of his intention to work late at the office.

"Pardon the question," said the Coroner, "but does it not strike you as somewhat strange that Mrs. Hazeldine should not have noticed the fact of her husband's non-arrival at home, and have been alarmed thereby, and have at once caused inquiry to be made?"

"There is nothing strange about it when it comes to be explained," said witness. "The fact is, when my father worked late at the office he usually slept on a little camp-bed in his dressing-room. This was to avoid disturbing my mother, who, as a rule, retires for the night at any early hour. If my mother woke up in the course of last night, or early this morning, she would naturally conclude that my father had let himself into

the house by means of his latch-key, and had gone to bed in the other room."

There being no more witnesses to examine, the Coroner announced that the inquiry would be adjourned for a week, so as to allow time for a post-mortem examination to be made, and also to enable the police to follow up their investigations into an affair which, the more it was looked into, the more mysterious it seemed to become.

CHAPTER X.

AN ANXIOUS WEEK.

EDWARD HAZELDINE and Mr. Prestwich retired to a private room in the hotel, while John Brancker walked back to the Bank like a man utterly dazed and confounded. He could not help noticing how the crowd that lingered about the hotel divided and made way for him, nor how they stared at him and broke into eager whisperings the moment he had passed. To his excited fancy it seemed as if everybody shrank from him. How could Strong swear as he had sworn! And yet there seemed the ring of truth in all he said. And those mysterious blood-stains! It was all a terrible mystery at present, but one which a few days at the most would surely unravel.

John Brancker paused on the steps outside the Bank, feeling utterly sick at heart. Not again to-day could he set foot inside those walls. The man whom he had respected and looked up to for so many years lay there dead, and he, John Brancker, was actually suspected of — Great heavens! could it be anything more than a horrible nightmare? He turned and set off homeward at a rapid pace. Awaiting him there were two loving hearts into which no vile breath of suspicion, not even if the evidence against him were an hundredfold stronger than it was, would ever find a moment's har-

borage. Never had his humble home seemed so sweet and dear to him as that afternoon.

It was in no very enivable frame of mind that Ephraim Judd quitted the jury-room and made his way towards the river-bank. He was in no mood for business ; he felt the need of being alone. How he despised himself for what he had done ! And yet he felt that, in similiar circumstances, he should be driven to do the same again. How was it possible for him to tell the truth, when to do so meant ruin to himself ? Not one day longer would Mr. Avison retain him in his service if he were to become aware of his practice of prying into other people's affairs, and, in that case, what would become of him and his widowed mother ?

To do Ephraim justice, in giving his evidence as he had given it, he had thought only of screening himself, never dreaming that by so doing he would be strengthening the web of suspicion which seemed to be closing slowly round Mr. Brancker. With all his petty, tortuous ways and crooked modes of reasoning, he shrank from doing anyone a direct injury. If, in his dealings with others, however simple those dealings might be, a roundabout course was sweeter to him than a straightforward one—that was a little weakness which he shared in common with many men far more highly placed than himself.

Truth to tell, Ephraim was not framed in the mould out of which your more robust villains are turned out. It might be said of him that, while to serve his own ends he would not have shrunk from pricking anyone with a pin in the dark, had a dagger been thrust into his hand he would have dropped it in terror and slunk away.

He had perjured himself to save himself, but nothing had been further from his intention than to do John Brancker an injury. No one had been more surprised than he at the turn Strong's evidence had taken ; he

was utterly at a loss how to reconcile the statements of the two men.

As soon as Edward Hazeldine and Mr. Prestwich were alone, the latter said :

"I wish you had heard the evidence this afternoon ; it has taken quite an unexpected turn."

"An unexpected turn ! In what way ?" asked Edward, with a quick, suspicious glance at his companion.

"As tending to fix a shadow of suspicion on Mr. Brancker."

"On Mr. Brancker ! What nonsense that must be !" exclaimed Edward, impatiently.

"I should probably have been as sceptical as you are, had I not heard the evidence in question," remarked Mr. Prestwich dryly.

He then went on to enlighten his companion, detailing the different points of evidence as deposed to by each witness in turn. Edward listened with growing wonder and uneasiness.

"That man Strong must have sworn to a lie," he said impetuously, when Mr. Prestwich had done.

"I don't think so, and I watched him narrowly. The fellow may be something of a dunderhead, but he seemed very much in earnest in what he said."

"Then you mean to imply that John Brancker has not told the truth ?"

"I imply nothing. I only take the evidence as it stands, and try to consider it dispassionately. It seems to be fully understood that Mr. Brancker called at the Bank about half-past ten last evening, and he himself admits that he did not get home till midnight. It would appear certain that Mr. Hazeldine came by his death within those two periods of time. The night-watchman is positive that he did not hear Mr. Brancker enter the Bank, which is accounted for by the latter making use of his pass-key. Both the murder and rob-

bery would seem to be the work of someone well acquainted with your father's habits, and who knew in which particular safe the bullion was kept, and where to find the key of it ; and who also possessed the means of getting quietly away after the deed was done. Mr. Brancker says that he knocked several times at Strong's door ; Strong says that no one knocked ; Mr. Brancker has a contusion over his left eye, which he accounts for by saying that a woman hit him with a stone. Finally, how are we to account for the blood-smears with which Mr. Brancker's drawer is marked both inside and out, as well as the floor in front of it ?"

"For all that you have said I do not care one jot," was Edward Hazeldine's answer. "I am perfectly convinced that John Brancker had no more to do with the death of my father than I had."

"I am not saying that he had. I am only showing you which way the evidence is tending. In all probability the researches of the police during the next few days will put an entirely different complexion on the affair."

Edward Hazeldine went his way, a thoroughly unhappy man. It is not too much to say that the horror with which he had first heard of his father's death was now to a certain extent overshadowed by the grief and shame caused him by the reading of his father's letter. Under his cold, practical, matter-of-fact exterior lay hidden a proud and, in some things, a very sensitive nature, which was far more easily wounded than anyone knew of, and very deep was the wound made in it to-day. He prided himself on being a thoroughly just man, and it was essential to his happiness that all his actions should meet with the approval of his own conscience. But still more essential was it that he should stand well in the eyes of the world, and be one of whom his fellow-townsmen might have just reason to feel proud. Hidden in the deepest recesses of his mind lay the half-formed hope of one day being able to represent his

native town in Parliament. It was a hope of which he had never spoken to anyone, but none the less was it secretly cherished. From the time when he was a boy of twelve, he had set himself steadily to regard his advancement in life, and the acquisition of wealth and social position, as the great ends for which he must never cease to strive.

But what would Lord and Lady Elstree think and say, and in what way would they act, should he ever be compelled to reveal to the world the real facts connected with his father's death? In such a case he knew full well that the doors of Seaham Lodge would be closed to him forever, and that he must give up all hope of ever winning the hand of Miss Winterton. Goshope Grange, one of the Earl's country seats, to which he had been invited for a week's shooting last September, and where he had for fellow-guests two lords, three baronets, and a host of minor celebrities, would know him no more. Social extinction would be the fate of him and his, should the contents of his father's letter ever become known. After such an exposure, how could he bear to look his fellow-townsmen in the face? He would have to give up his business, if indeed, his partners did not insist on his seceding from it; all his ambitious projects would fall in ruins around him, and he would have to seek another home in some place where he was known to none.

"And as matters were now turning out, it seemed only too probable that he would feel himself compelled to reveal the contents of the letter. It would never do to let an innocent man suffer under the stigma of so terrible a crime. Whatever the cost to him and his might be, that man's innocence must be proclaimed aloud on the housetops. Very bitter were his thoughts as he walked slowly through the town, with his hat pulled over his brows and his eyes bent on the ground, towards his father's house. A chill shot through his heart as his fingers touched the muffled knocker. The

servant who let him in burst out crying afresh the moment she set eyes on him, and he needed all his nerve to enable him to retain his outward composure as he opened the drawing-room door and went in. Clement was sitting on one side of the fireplace, Fanny on the other. Edward touched his brother lightly on the shoulder, and then the hands of both met in a long, affectionate grip.

"Where is my mother?" asked the elder man.

"She is lying down in her own room," answered Fanny. "When I went to her, a few minutes ago, she was asleep."

"Sleep is the best thing for her just now. I must leave it to you, Clem, to induce her to keep up her strength as much as possible."

"You may rely upon it that I will look after her."

Presently Edward took his leave. He was restless and anxious to get home. He wanted to be alone with his thoughts. The company of anyone would have been distasteful to him just then. He shut himself up in his study as soon as he reached home.

Next day Mr. Avison, who had been telegraphed for, arrived from Paris, and he and John Brancker at once set to work to ascertain to what extent the Bank was a sufferer by the recent robbery. The result was that gold and notes to the amount of about three thousand one hundred pounds proved to be missing, together with the twelve hundred pounds which the dead man had brought with him from London.

The investigation served to bring to light one singular fact which puzzled Mr. Avison and John Brancker not a little. Mr. Hazeldine's private ledger was missing, as were also a number of check slips on which the under-cashiers entered the numbers of the notes which they paid over at the close of each day's business.

"It certainly looks," said Mr. Avison, "as if the thief or thieves were intimately acquainted with the ins and outs of our business, or else why should they have taken

away with them the only evidence by means of which we should have been able to trace the missing notes?"

But John Brancker could only profess himself to be as utterly puzzled over the affair as Mr. Avison was.

Although Mr. Avison had read the evidence taken at the inquest, he had hitherto attached no importance to the fact that certain portions of it seemed to point the finger of suspicion at John Brancker. John was such an old and tried servant, and he had such implicit confidence in his integrity, that he had only smiled to himself, as he thought how wide of the truth people are often led by circumstantial evidence.

But now the case began to put on a very different complexion. A grave suspicion was taking root in his mind, that no one but a man thoroughly acquainted with the inner working of the Bank could be at the bottom of the mystery. It troubled him more even than the loss of the money troubled him, to think that his faith in human nature should be so rudely shaken. But Mr. Avison was by nature a very reticent man, a man who thought much but said little, and John had not the faintest notion of the feelings at work in his employer's mind. The Banker said to himself that some further evidence would probably be forthcoming at the adjourned inquest, and that he could afford to wait till then.

Obed Sweet was another person who was considerably troubled in the article he called his mind. That Mr. Hazeldine had come by his death between half-past ten and half-past eleven o'clock, everybody seemed fully agreed. Yet was Obed quite aware that during the greater portion of the time in question, he had been asleep in his room downstairs. This it was that troubled him. If he had only kept awake, as he ought to have done, might he not have heard someone come in, or go out, or have been alarmed by the noise of a struggle, or by some cry for help? Unfortunately, he had heard nothing. He tried to argue himself into the belief that

he was a remarkably light sleeper. "Why, a mouse could hardly scamper across the floor without my hearing it," he said to himself again and again. Still he wished most fervently that he had not fallen asleep on that fatal night.

Meanwhile, the needful authority having been granted by the Coroner, Mr. Hazeldine's funeral took place. It was attended by nearly half the population of Ashdown, either as followers or onlookers. A day or two later, the jury met again for the adjourned inquest.

CHAPTER XI.

THE VERDICT.

ONE important piece of evidence bearing on the murder of Mr. Hazeldine, and one only, had been ferreted out by the police in the course of the week which preceded the adjourned inquest. They had discovered the man who sold the weapon with which the crime had presumably been perpetrated. The point that still remained to be cleared up was the identification of the purchaser of the knife.

As before, the jury assembled in a room of the "White Lion Hotel."

For the sake of appearances, Edward Hazeldine had been obliged to retain the services of Mr. Prestwich, who was supposed to be there with the view of looking after the interests of the family of the deceased. Mr. Avison occupied a seat in the reserved space, and all the witnesses who had been called and sworn on the previous occasion were again in attendance.

The depositions having been read over, Dr. Barton was called, and deposed that, in conjunction with his colleague, Dr. Stone, he had made a post-mortem examination of the body of deceased, and that they found the cause of death to be puncture of the tissues of the heart with the point of some sharp instrument.

The weapon produced exactly fitted the cavity of the wound, and bearing in mind the fact that it was found close by the body, there was little room for doubt that it was the instrument with which the fatal blow had been inflicted.

The evidence of Dr. Stone was to the same effect as that of the previous witness.

Patience Strong, wife of William Strong, deposed that, to the best of her belief, her husband never left home on the night of the supposed murder. He had been ill for two or three days previously, and on the evening in question she left him about nine o'clock, sitting in his slippers by the fire, when she went out to see a neighbor who had a sick child, and she found him still sitting in his slippers by the fire when she got home at five minutes before twelve.

After speaking in a low voice to Chief Constable Mace for a few moments, the Coroner called upon Walter Brill to come forward. In response to the summons a dark, quick-eyed, nervous little man, evidently dressed in his Sunday best, pressed his way through the crowd, and was sworn in the usual way. He deposed that he resided at No. 29 Winton Street, London, and that a few days ago he received, through the police, the photograph of a knife, produced, with a printed request that if he remembered having sold such a weapon he would at once communicate with the authorities. As he at once recognized the photograph's being very like that of a knife sold by him about two months before, he did as he was requested, and was waited upon by Mr. Mace and another gentleman, with the result that he was before the Coroner to-day to give evidence.

The knife now put into his hands was sold by him on a certain day in August last. He knew it by a private mark, which he put on all goods out of the common way sold by him. Had no means of telling the exact date when he sold the knife, but knew it was in August, because his little girl, who had just recovered from the

measles, was running about the shop at the time. The knife was called an "American knife," but was in reality of Sheffield manufacture. It was made of the best steel, had one blade six inches in length, and opened with a spring. The purchaser of it was a gentleman about fifty years old, who carried a small black leather bag, of which he seemed to take especial care.

Being pressed to describe more particularly the appearance of the gentleman, witness said that, to the best of his recollection, he wore a black tail-coat and waistcoat, and a high, old-fashioned collar. He had no beard and not much whisker, and was very "respectable-looking." Being asked to look round the room, and see whether anyone among those present bore any resemblance to the person who bought the knife, witness rubbed his hands nervously together, and then turned and fronted the sixty or seventy faces grouped at the other end of the room.

By the time witness had reached this point the eyes of every spectator and jurymen had shifted from his face to the face of John Brancker. Mr. Avison and John were sitting on one side of the room between the crowd of ordinary onlookers and the Coroner, and facing the jury.

As Walter Brill went on to describe the appearance of the man who bought the knife, John felt his color change in spite of himself. He was a shy, nervous man at the best of times, and totally unfitted to go through such an ordeal as the present one. He could feel, rather than see, that the eyes of all present were bent upon him. He turned first red and then white, and his lower lip began to quiver, as it had a trick of doing in moments of excitement or agitation. Mr. Mace favored his colleague from Scotland Yard with a nod that was perceptible to him alone. Almost unconsciously Mr. Avison moved his chair a few inches further away. John noticed the action, and his heart swelled within him.

The cause of all this was the strangely accurate description given by Brill of the man who had purchased the knife. John Brancker was verging towards middle-age. He went to London three or four times a month, on which occasions he took with him a small black leather bag. A black tail-coat and a high stiff collar formed part of his customary attire. He was clean-shaven, except for two short side-whiskers which began to show signs of grey ; while no one could dispute the fact that he was a very staid and respectable-looking man.

The eyes of Brill roved with a sort of vague inquisitiveness from face to face, but no light of recognition came into them. He shook his head slowly and turned to the Coroner.

"Take your time ; don't be in too great a hurry," said the latter ; so Brill turned to look again.

It needs but that two or three people should stare intently at some one object for the eyes of all there to be drawn in the same direction. So it was in the present case. Brill awoke to the fact that the spectators were not looking so much at him as at someone behind him. He turned, letting his eyes follow the direction of theirs, and confronted John Brancker.

The two men looked at each other. For the first few moments it seemed to Brill that he was gazing into the face of a man whom he had never seen before, but as his eyes took in one by one the different items of John's attire, and then wandered back to his smooth-shaven chin and pointed collars, and when he became conscious that everyone in the room was waiting with a sort of breathless anxiety to see whether he would recognize the man before him, then he began to fancy that the face he was looking at was not altogether strange to him, and that he must have seen it before. In such a case fancy goes a long way on the road to certainty. But Brill felt the responsibility of his position, and was nervously anxious not to make a mistake.

"Well," said the Coroner, after a pause, during which, as the saying goes, a pin might have been heard to drop, "are you satisfied that the person to whom you sold the knife is nowhere among those present?"

Brill drew a long breath, glanced furtively round the room again, and then said in a low voice :

"There is one gentleman here that seems something like the party who called at my shop in August."

"Be good enough to point out the person to whom you refer."

"That is the gentleman," said the witness, turning and indicating John Brancker with his finger. A low murmur, like an inarticulate sigh, ran through the room, and then the silence became more intense than before.

"Are you prepared to swear that is the gentlemen to whom you sold the knife you have seen here to-day?"

"No, I am not prepared to swear to anything of the kind."

"To the best of your belief is he the person to whom you sold the knife?"

"No, I won't go even as far as that," answered Brill, dogmatically. "All I can say is that there is a strong likeness between him and the party who came to my shop; but, for all that, I'm not going to swear that it was him." Nor from that point could anything move him.

John Brancker rose to his feet.

"Don't say anything now," whispered Mr. Avison.

"I must, sir—I must," answered John, with a passionate ring in his voice. Then turning to the Coroner, he said :

"Sir, as I stand here, a living man, I swear that I never saw or spoke to this person before to-day, that I was never inside his shop in my life, and that I never purchased a knife like the one in question either of him or of anyone else." Having said these few words, John resumed his seat.

"Have you any questions to ask the last witness?" asked the Coroner of Mr. Prestwich. He had listened with polite attention to John, but had made no comment.

Mr. Prestwich shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. Only two minutes before he had whispered to Edward Hazeldine, who was seated in the next chair, "The evidence this week seems tending in the same direction as that of last week."

"I don't care for that—John Brancker is an innocent man," was the emphatic reply.

"In any case," said Mr. Prestwich, "I should like to put a few questions to the man Brill."

"I beg you will do nothing of the kind, at least not now," was all he got in answer.

After that Mr. Prestwich could say no more. To him Edward Hazeldine's pig-headedness, as he termed it in his own mind, was altogether inexplicable.

But more inexplicable was it to Edward that in the description given by Brill of the man who had bought the knife no one should have recognized the portrait of Mr. Hazeldine. He had recognized it in a moment, but all the others, having had their minds imbued with the idea that the description must of necessity apply to John Brancker, had failed to discover the other likeness—all except Ephraim Judd. Brill's account had given him a clue to something which had hitherto puzzled him not a little. "Now, I can guess it all," he muttered under his breath. "I wonder whether anyone suspects besides myself." Henceforward for him the tragedy had a double meaning.

Both Mr. Hazeldine and John Brancker belonged to the staid, old-fashioned school of bank officials. They were sober in their ways and sober in their attire. There was no great dissimilarity in their ages, and in the course of years John, without being consciously aware of it, had got into the way of copying his superior officer both in manner and dress; so that, under the

circumstances, the mistake made not only by Brill, but by those who knew both the men, was hardly to be wondered at, however unfortunate it might prove to be for one of them.

There being no further evidence forthcoming, the Coroner proceeded to sum up the case. It was not his fault that nearly all the evidence seemed to point to one conclusion. He stated the facts as he found them, and strove in no way to bias the minds of the jury.

The jury retired at twenty minutes past five and were away forty minutes. Much eager whispered conversation went on during their absence, but no one attempted to leave the room. Everyone felt the intensity of the strain. John Brancker sat perfectly still, staring into vacancy, with his hands crossed over the knob of his umbrella. Edward Hazeldine sat like a man in a stupor, heedless of all that was going on around him. Mr. Prestwich took snuff and conversed with the Coroner in undertones. There was a momentary rustle, and then a dead silence fell upon the room as the jury filed back to their seats, and returned a verdict of wilful murder against John Brancker.

A ghastly pallor overspread John's face as the words fell upon his ears. They surely could not be meant to apply to him! His lips formed themselves to speak, but no sound came from them. Oh! to think—to think that anyone could for a moment believe his was the hand which had struck so foul a blow! Then he bowed his head and waited, while two or three scalding tears dropped unseen on his crossed hands.

Edward Hazeldine strode across the room and grasped John by the hand. "Mr. Brancker," he said, "I am profoundly grieved at what has happened here to-day. From the bottom of my heart I believe you to be an innocent man. This verdict seems to me a most monstrous one—one which will never be sustained by that higher tribunal to which your case will now be rele-

gated. Believe me, I would stake my life on your innocence."

John grasped the hand that lay in his. His momentary burst of emotion had relieved his overcharged feelings. His courage was coming back to him. "Thank you, sincerely, Mr. Edward, for your kind words," he said as he stood up. "They have taken a great weight off my heart. The world can hardly believe me guilty when it knows that you have faith in my innocence."

At this moment Clement Hazeldine came pushing his way through the crowd. He had been unable to get there before. He was inexpressibly shocked at the news which had just been told him. He, too, grasped John by the hand, and assured him in warm terms of his thorough confidence in his innocence.

"Now I can face whatever has yet to come," said John, with the ghost of a smile on his quivering lips. "But who is to break the news to my sister, and—and to Hermia?"

"I will do that, if you will allow me," answered Clement, gently.

"Do—do. Poor Lotty! Poor Hermy!" He turned away; it was all he could do to keep from breaking down again.

Other friends crowded round him with sympathetic looks and cheering words. Mr. Avison had slipped quietly away without speaking to anyone.

The committal warrant, duly signed by the Coroner, was ready by this time. The Chief Constable touched his prisoner on the shoulder, and John followed him to the fly which was waiting to convey him to the gaol, a mile or more away, at the other end of the town. A last hearty hand-shake with several friends, and then the two men got inside, and were driven off. One by one the crowd congregated round the door of the "White Lion" melted away.

Next forenoon John was brought up before the loca

Bench of magistrates, when the whole dreary business of the evidence against him was minutely sifted and gone through afresh, and after a couple of adjournments, John was committed to take his trial on the capital charge at the forthcoming winter assizes, held at Dulminster, the county town eight miles from Ash-down.

CHAPTER XII.

AMO, AMAS.

As has been already stated, it was about a year before Mr. Hazeldine's tragical end that Frank Derison had been made the confidant by his friend Winton of a secret which the latter was not justified in revealing to anyone. He had been told that there was a deposit of twelve hundred pounds standing to the credit of Hermia Rivers, in Umpleby's Bank at Dulminster, and the news had given a spur to his lagging affections, and had decided him to propose to Hermy with the least possible delay.

All his life Frank had been used to talk freely to his mother, and as soon as he reached home that evening, he did not fail to tell her what had passed between Winton and himself, as far as it related to Miss Rivers.

"What a dear, noble-hearted girl she is!" he wound up by saying. "I love her to distraction, and have done so for ever so long. Of course, twelve hundred pounds isn't to be despised, but if she hadn't a shilling I should love her just the same. She's the only girl in the world I could ever be happy with."

Mrs. Derison listened to the boy's rhodomontade with a smile which he took to be one of sympathy, but which in reality was one of bitterness. She had heard precisely the same sort of nonsense—in that case addressed to herself—from the lips of Frank's father a quarter of a century before; and at that time she had been simple

and inexperienced enough to pin her faith to it. What had it resulted in as far as she was concerned? In Dead-sea fruit—in dust and ashes. And so would it be with any girl who might lend an ear to Frank's vows, and entrust her future to his keeping; for in him Mrs. Derison recognized an exact counterpart of his father; handsome, gay, not without a certain surface cleverness; lazy and good-natured, with a manner that rarely failed to charm, but with a heart that was thoroughly selfish at the core, although the owner of it was totally unconscious of the fact. With such natures self-deception—unconscious self-deception—is one of the primary laws of their being.

"Yes," said Mrs. Derison, with a somewhat dubious air, "I do not doubt that Miss Rivers is a very charming girl, nor that you fancy yourself very deeply in love with her; and certainly, as you say, in our circumstances a fortune of twelve hundred pounds is by no means to be despised. But, on the other hand, it is not always advisable for a very young man—which you still are—to tie himself down for life, unless his future, to some extent at least, is already mapped out for him, and he is in a position to form some idea how far it may be affected by an early and perhaps imprudent marriage. Your future, I am sorry to say, is anything but an assured one; still, it may contain hidden possibilities of which at present you and I know nothing." Then she went on to hint darkly at certain possible contingencies in connection with his position at the Bank. Mr. Avison, senior, was a very old man; there was little likelihood that Mr. Avison, junior, would ever marry; Frank was a relative—though a distant one—and if only he had the sense to play his cards properly, and to wait patiently, who could say what might not come to pass? In any case, it would be well to pause and consider before committing himself seriously with any young woman, however charming she might be.

Mrs. Derison's words had the effect she intended.

them to have. They threw an effectual chill for the time being over Frank's love aspirations. Hitherto he had had no faith that any special advancement at the Bank would accrue to him more than to others ; indeed, it had often seemed to him that he would have stood a better chance of promotion had he not been a relation of his employer. Still, after all, might there not be more in his mother's hints than she was willing to let appear on the surface ? He knew that she went occasionally to see old Mr. Avison, and had she not had good grounds for doing so, she would not have said as much as she had said. His brain was of the sanguine, castle-building order, and almost unconsciously his day-dreams began to assume an auriferous tinge, such as they had ever lacked before. It would be as well, perhaps, not to be too precipitate in the matter of Hermia. She was a darling girl, and he loved her passionately ; still——. Even in his thoughts he got no farther than that.

But there came a day, two or three weeks later, when, not for the first time, Frank and Hermia found themselves on the river together. Frank pulled up stream till all the other boats that were out were left behind ; then, in a quiet shallow, he fastened the painter round the root of an old tree, and prepared to enjoy a smoke. It was an afternoon in early winter. The sun was drawing towards the west, and in its softened radiance, Hermia sat like a creature glorified. Never had she seemed so lovely in Frank's eyes as then. For once the fervor of passion overcame him ; for once he flung prudence and all care for his worldly advancement to the winds ; for once his heart spoke without an after-thought. A couple of minutes sufficed for him to say what he had to say, and then he paused, leaning forward towards her, his eyes glowing as they had never glowed before, his whole being instinct with an emotion which was almost as great a surprise to himself as it was to the girl sitting opposite him ; for Hermia, much

as she liked Frank, had not thought of him as a possible lover. She was heart-whole and fancy-free, and the revelation came on her with the shock of a great surprise.

There is no need to describe in detail the scene that followed. Frank combated Hermia's objections and scruples one by one, and, in the end, was provisionally accepted. The affair was to be kept a secret from everybody for twelve months, during which time they would hold themselves as being, to a certain extent, engaged to each other. At the end of that time, either of them who might so choose, would be free to break the compact ; but should neither of them wish to do so, then the engagement should be formally ratified and made known to those whom it might concern. It was a foolish arrangement to enter into, but excusable on Hermia's part, on the score of her ignorance of the world and its ways, as well as of the possibilities of her own heart. She loved no one else, and it seemed to her that she never should. She thought to be the same always as she was at nineteen. She had known and had liked Frank for years, and would fain have had the relationship between them continue the same in the future as it had been in the past ; but if it made Frank happy to love her, and if he was really sincere in wishing her to become his wife, why, in that case, she would try to love him a little in return. Yes, she actually told herself that she would try to love. Foolish girl ! As if love comes by trying for ! But she was soon to be made wiser, after that sweet old fashion which yet seems such a surprising fashion when first it makes itself felt and known.

Having given her word, Hermia would not revoke it ; but the compact was one which, for her at least, had no element of happiness in it. She hated the secrecy which it involved, and as time went on she began to find that her heart, instead of being drawn closer to Frank by the bond between them, seemed rather to be repelled there-

by. She felt like one who had sold her freedom and got nothing in return. Then Clement Hazeldine appeared on the scene, and Hermia slowly awoke to the fact that she had made a terrible mistake.

Meanwhile, Frank kept on in his old happy, careless way. He loved Hermia after a fashion, and probably as much as it was in him to love anyone, while the secret between them lent a piquancy to the feeling he had for her which he did not fail to appreciate.

John Brancker and his sister could not help seeing something of what was going on, and smiled and talked to themselves about it; and although, as time went on, they wondered a little that Frank did not speak out, they decided to take no apparent notice, but to let the affair develop of its own accord.

But now the year was hurrying to its close, soon the last of the twelve months would be here, and Hermia began to dread more and more the coming of the day when she would be called upon to decide whether her engagement to Frank should be broken off, or whether the bond that held them should be drawn still closer, and so merge at last into that closest bond of all. That Frank would hold to his part of the engagement she had no reason to doubt. What, then, ought she to do? She could no longer hide from herself that her heart belonged not to Frank, but to another; the awakening had come at last, but she would have found it hard to say whether the knowledge made her happy or the reverse.

Before this time, however, Clement Hazeldine had discovered that he, too, had lost his heart; but, as he told himself not once but a hundred times, he had found Hermia too late: she belonged to another; for that there was some sort of an understanding between her and Derison he felt nearly sure, although why there should be any secrecy about it he altogether failed to comprehend. As we have already seen, he was in the habit of going to John Brancker's house twice a week,

ostensibly for the purpose of forming one in a musical quintette, but the magnet which really drew him there was something far different. Then, for two brief hours he could bask in Hermia's loveliness, he could gaze unrebuked into the depths of her violet eyes, and listen to the music of her voice, and steep his senses in the sweet fragrance of her presence. Frank, in whose ears the click of a billiard ball was far sweeter music than any discoursed by violin and piano, looked in occasionally on the musical evenings, when he played an indifferent second to Clem's first fiddle. He felt no jealousy at seeing the young Doctor so often at the Cottage; he was blessed with too good an opinion of himself to feel jealous of anyone. The limit of time would soon be reached to which he and Hermy had bound themselves by a conditional promise. He told himself that he still loved her as much as ever, and when the time should come for him to declare his intentions one way or the other, he felt nearly—but not quite—sure that he should say to Hermy: "I cannot live without you. Be my wife."

Such was the state of affairs when the peaceful current of events was broken by the tragic death of Mr. Hazeldine and the subsequent arrest of John Brancker. Then followed a terribly anxious time for Miss Brancker and her niece, during which both Clement and Frank called often at Nairn Cottage. It is in such seasons of trial that a man's real qualities are most conspicuously made manifest. Clement's sympathy was so evidently genuine and heartfelt; wherever it was possible to ease their cares, or transfer any portion of their trouble, however small, from their shoulders to his own, it was done so quietly and unobtrusively, that they could not feel otherwise than touched by so much devotion to them and their interests. On the other hand, Frank's sympathy was so obviously forced and unreal; the whole state of affairs was so palpably distasteful to him, that even simple-hearted Miss Brancker began to sus-

pect that perhaps she and her brother had been misreading the young man's character all along, and had been attributing to him qualities very different from any which he really possessed. But Frank was essentially a creature of the sunshine, a being to whom sickness and trouble and the thousand-and-one anxieties to which our poor humanity is liable, were utterly alien. When the skies began to lower and thunder filled the air, he was as much out of his element as a butterfly on a rainy day.

The year of waiting agreed upon between the two young people came to an end while John Brancker was awaiting his trial. Of course, at such a time any talk about love affairs was out of the question. By Frank the delay was hailed gladly, since it put off till a future time the necessity of arriving at a decision as to which he was still as far as ever from having made up his mind one way or the other. Far was he from suspecting that to Hermia the delay was a relief at least equal to that felt by himself.

It was a dark and anxious time for Edward Hazeldine. Knowing what he did, he felt bound to proclaim aloud his belief in John Brancker's innocence. There was no other course open to him, and for this reason it was that, without consulting anyone, he secured the services of Mr. Burgees, the eminent criminal advocate, for the defence.

It was indeed very bitter to him to think that he, who had always prided himself on his rigid sense of justice—one of the chief maxims of whose life had been to do unto others as he would have them do unto him—should allow an innocent man to be cast into prison and be too timid of soul to speak the word that would have set him free. But the day had now gone by for revealing to the world, except at the last extremity, that which his father's letter had told him. He had allowed the man be brought in guilty by a coroner's jury, he had al-

lowed him to be committed by the magistrates, he had allowed him to linger through long, weary weeks in prison with an accusation the most terrible of all accusations hanging over his head, and yet he had not opened his lips. To do so now would be moral and social suicide. He had gone so far that to turn back would be worse than to go forward. He must take the risk, happen what might. If John Brancker were acquitted then might all yet be well, but should the verdict go against him, then—and only then—the dread secret must be told. Not for a thousand such secrets should an innocent man go to the gallows. After that, let ruin, hopeless and irremediable, be his portion.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TRIAL.

THE winter assizes at Dulminster were held early in December, so that John Brancker had not many weeks to lie in prison before being called upon to stand his trial for the murder of James Hazeldine. The grand jury found a true bill against the prisoner, and one crisp, sunny morning, John found himself in a sort of a pen in the centre of a densely crowded court, the one object on which several hundred pairs of curious eyes, some of them helped by opera-glasses, were focussed. He was pale, but quite composed, and when called upon in the usual form to plead to the indictment, his low but emphatic "Not guilty" was clearly audible to everyone there.

His sister and his niece had been permitted to have an interview with him on the eve of the trial, and he had contrived to infuse into them some of the courage which he felt, or professed to feel, as to the morrow's result. They were staying with some friends in Close Street, and Clement Hazeldine, who had given his patients into the charge of a brother practitioner for a

couple of days, had arranged to send them frequent messages from the Court during the progress of the trial. The prisoner's defence had been entrusted to the hands of the well-known Mr. Burgees, with whom was Mr. Timperly as junior. Mr. Mulgrave had been specially retained as counsel for the Crown.

It was none other than the murdered man's eldest son who had retained Mr. Burgees to defend the prisoner. This was a point which had been much commented upon by the good people of Ashdown, and one that had told strongly with them in John Brancker's favor. If a clear, hard-headed man of the world like Edward Hazeldine had such faith in his innocence, how would it be possible for any jury to bring him in guilty? Then again, was it not a well-known fact that the younger son, Clement, was a frequent visitor at Mr. Brancker's house, and among such of the wiseacres as made it their business to pry into every little matter in any way connected with the affair, there were not wanting whispers of an engagement between the young doctor and the accused man's niece. No, John Brancker must be an innocent man, they decided among themselves; and yet, on the face of it, the evidence against him seemed terribly conclusive, nor, so far as was known, had anything likely to shake it been brought to light since the date of the prisoner's committal. Strenuous efforts had been made to find the man and woman whom John stated that he had encountered, quarrelling fiercely, while on his way back from Strong's cottage, and one of whom, the woman, had flung a stone at him, which had contused his forehead. But nowhere could any traces of them be found, neither had the offer of a reward, if they would come forward and give evidence, been productive of any result.

On the morning of the trial Edward Hazeldine drove over to Dulminster in his dog-cart, and put up his horse at the "Eagle" Hotel, which is exactly opposite the Court-house. His intention had been to find a seat

near the counsel for the defence, but he abandoned the idea at the last moment. Happening to look at himself in the glass he started at the sight of his haggard visage, and this morning his hands trembled so much that not for a hundred pounds could he have signed his own name. He felt that he could not face the ordeal of the Court, that he could not bear the scrutiny of the crowd of coldly-curious eyes which would focus themselves on him as being the eldest son of the murdered man. He hired a private room on the first floor overlooking the entrance to the Court, and arranged for a messenger to bring him half-hourly tidings of the progress of the trial ; and there he sat throughout the day, with a decanter of brandy at his elbow, he who, under ordinary circumstances, was one of the most abstemious of men. He had his father's letter buttoned up in the breast-pocket of his coat. It was not expected that the trial would extend over more than one day, and he had arranged that the moment the jury brought in their verdict its purport should be made known to him. Then, if the fatal word " Guilty " were pronounced, he would at once rush across to the Court, and before the Judge would have had time to assume the black cap, he would proclaim to the world the innocence of the man at the bar. His fevered imagination rehearsed the scene again and again, always with some fresh features or added details, but always he seemed to see the horror that would creep into the eyes of that vast crowd as he told his tale word by word, and proclaimed himself for the vile coward that he was.

There was one other person, Ephraim Judd, to wit, who had also made up his mind that, should the prisoner at the bar be adjudged guilty, he must at once crave leave to speak, and to tell all present certain things which were known to himself alone, but which would go far towards proving the innocence of John Brancker. He must relate how he saw the prisoner leave the Bank, when the latter went to fetch his umbrella, within five

minutes of the time he entered it. He must explain all about the blood-smears in the prisoner's drawer, and the marks on the floor. He must confess to what he saw when he looked through the fan-light over Mr. Hazeldine's office door. He was fully alive to the fact that to do this would be to effect his own ruin, he was quite aware that he ought to have told all he knew at the first examination before the Coroner; at that time he had been deterred from speaking by a fear of the consequences which would accrue to himself, but should the worst come to the worst, no such fear should hold him back to-day. Be the consequences to himself what they might, John Brancker must not be condemned to die, until he, Ephraim Judd, had told all that which he had till now so carefully hidden. It was in no enviable frame of mind that he walked down to the court on the morning of the trial.

It is not needful that any detailed account should be given here of the progress of the trial. The evidence of the various witnesses was little more than a recapitulation of that given by them at the inquest. No fresh facts had come to light in the interim, neither did the cross-examination of the witnesses tend to elicit any further point which told materially either for or against the prisoner. As before, Brill, the man from whom the knife had been purchased by which Mr. Hazeldine had come by his death, would neither swear positively that the prisoner was the man to whom he had sold the weapon, nor that he was not. He, the prisoner, was like the man, and yet he wasn't like the man; he couldn't be positive, and he wouldn't take an oath one way or the other.

William Strong, the organ-blower, was still as positive as ever that he had not left home on the night of the murder, and that if the prisoner had knocked at the door of his cottage he could not have failed to hear him.

Ephraim Judd, Obed and Amanda Sweet, Doctor Barton and Mr. Mace, were each called upon in turn,

and were each submitted to a cross-examination more or less severe, which, however, in no case brought to light anything of consequence tending to the exculpation of the prisoner.

Last of all, two people who had not been examined at the inquest were called and sworn. The first of them was a clerk from the Bank of England, who deposed to having changed notes for gold to the amount of twelve hundred pounds on the day of the murder, and who, on being shown a photograph of Mr. Hazeldine, recognized it as a likeness of the person for whom he had effected the exchange in question.

The second person who was called upon was Mr. Avison. He had no positive evidence to offer in the case, beyond the fact that the Bank had been robbed of an amount a little in excess of four thousand pounds; but what the Counsel for the Prosecution was desirous of eliciting from him was his opinion as to whether such a crime, considered in all its bearings, could have been perpetrated by anyone who was not well acquainted with the habits of the murdered man, as well as with the working of the inner machinery of the Bank. Mr. Avison was clearly of opinion that the crime was the result of a carefully arranged plan, the inception, if not the carrying out, of which was due to someone who had an intimate knowledge of certain details, such as it was next to impossible for any outsider to have.

The examination of Mr. Avison brought the evidence to an end. Then a number of witnesses were called to testify to the accused man's character, among the rest being Mr. Avison. This might have gone on for an indefinite time if the Judge had not at length expressed himself as being perfectly satisfied that it was impossible for any man's character to stand higher in the estimation of those who had known him intimately for years than that of the prisoner at the bar. Then, after the counsel on both sides had been heard, his Lordship proceeded to charge the jury.

This he did in a dispassionate and unbiassed manner, reviewing the evidence carefully, weighing each item in the judicial scales, and giving to each its just preponderance as it told for or against the prisoner. He was most careful in pointing out that the evidence was entirely of a circumstantial character. On the one hand, there was the certainty that the crime was committed some time between half-past ten o'clock and half-past eleven, and the fact that the prisoner entered the Bank by means of his pass-key about twenty minutes past ten and did not reach home till close upon midnight ; and that the account he gave of having walked all the way to Strong's house during that interval of time, and of having knocked at his door, was, so far as regarded the latter part of the prisoner's assertion, emphatically denied by Strong himself.

Then there were the blood-smears in his private drawer at the office and on the floor, close by, for which he professed himself utterly unable to account. Then again, the facts of the case would seem clearly to indicate that the criminal was thoroughly acquainted both with the murdered man's habits as also with the interior economy of the Bank—that he knew where to look for the key of the strong-room, and on which day of the week the largest amount of gold was to be found there. He, the Judge, advised the jury not to attach too much importance to the evidence of Brill, the man who sold the knife. His experience had led him to the conclusion that it was impossible to be too cautious in accepting evidence as to personal identity, more especially after any considerable lapse of time ; and Brill had very rightly declined to swear to a point as to which his memory was evidently at fault.

There were several points in the prisoner's favor, his Lordship went on to remark, to which the jury would not fail to give due weight in their deliberations. In the first place, there was the entire absence of any conceivable motive on the prisoner's part tending to the

commission of such a crime. He and the murdered man had been friends and fellow-workers for years, and, as far as was known, they had always been on the best of terms towards each other. Further, none of the stolen property had been traced home to the prisoner; although, of course, it was no very difficult matter to hide away a large sum in notes and gold where it would be next to impossible for anyone to find it. Finally, the testimony they had heard given to the very high character borne by the prisoner, was a point which would doubtless receive due consideration at their hands.

It was five o'clock when the jury quitted the court, and it wanted twenty minutes to seven when they returned. As soon as Miss Brancker and Hermia heard that the jury had retired to consider their verdict, they left the house in Close Street, where they had been staying, and accompanied by Clement Hazeldine, made their way to the Court-house where, through Clem's influence, they were accommodated with seats in a private room. As the slow minutes passed without bringing any news, the strain upon them grew almost too intense to be endured.

Clement was utterly perplexed by the non-appearance of his brother. From hour to hour he looked for him, but in vain. Surely, Edward would have let nothing less than illness keep him away! Clem had felt very grateful to him for his outspoken championship of John Brancker, although, perhaps, knowing as he did something of the hardness of his brother's character, he had been a little surprised at the attitude taken up by him from the first day of the inquiry. Somehow, it scarcely seemed to harmonize with the idea of Edward, which had unconsciously formulated itself in his mind; but that, as he told himself, only served to prove what erroneous views one may form even of those who are closest to us, and whom we flatter ourselves we know and understand best,

His Lordship, the jury, and the prisoner being all back in their places, and silence having been proclaimed in Court, the Foreman of the Jury, in reply to the usual question put by the Clerk of Arraignment, said, in a voice which every ear there was strained to catch :

" We find the prisoner at the bar 'Not guilty.' "

A murmur that seemed half a sigh at first ran through the crowd, and then swiftly rose and swelled into a great cheer, such as the rafters of the old Court-house had rarely, if ever, echoed before.

Three minutes later his sister's arms were round John Brancker's neck, while Edward Hazeldine's messenger was speeding to him with the good news.

John stayed in a private room until the Court had emptied and the crowd dispersed. He was particularly anxious to reach home with as little observation as possible, so it was arranged that he and his sister and Her-mia, with Clement Hazeldine by way of escort, should be driven to Ashdown in a fly, instead of returning by train.

Accordingly, a fly was brought, and John Brancker stepped out into the open air a free man. For a few moments the sensation was overpowering ; a mental vertigo possessed him ; but Clem's strong arm was within his, supporting him, and presently the feeling passed. They were all in the fly, a constable had shut the door, and the driver was on the point of starting, when a figure sprang out of the darkness into the circle of light radiated by the lamp over the Court-house door, and pushing his way through the little crowd of officials, laid a detaining hand on the vehicle. The lamplight brought into relief a haggard, sinister-looking face and two furtive, red-rimmed eyes.

" Mr. Brancker, sir," said the fellow, speaking in hoarse, drink-sodden tones, " if such a wretch as I may be allowed to thank heaven for anything, then I thank it that you are once more a free man. You don't remember me, perhaps ? I am Richard Varell, your old

clerk. Ah, you recollect me now. Changed, ain't I? But no matter about that. From the first I swore that whoever else might be guilty of Mr. Hazeldine's death, you at least were innocent. As for him—curse him!—he hounded me to my ruin, and he deserved his fate. For him no pity is needed. But as for you, sir, I say again, thank heaven you are free!" He threw up one arm as though it were a signal of farewell, and falling back, was lost next moment in the darkness.

That night Edward Hazeldine slept a deep, dreamless sleep for the first time since his father's death.

CHAPTER XIV.

EXIT MISS LETITIA.

It is to be hoped that the reader has not quite forgotten Miss Pengarvon and her sister, although we have heard nothing of them since that December night, now many years ago, when poor, unforgiven Isabel was found lying in the snow in front of the great door of Broome.

To the two lonely sisters, wearing out their uneventful lives in the gray old house, the changes wrought by time were few indeed. Their dark hair had slowly silvered, their long, thin faces had grown longer and thinner, their tall figures looked a little more gaunt than of yore, but that was all. To them the summer and winter of one year were so like the summer and winter of another, that they almost forgot the passage of time. They worked hard at their embroidery, and sold the proceeds of their labor; they pinched and scraped, and saved in every possible way, growing more miserly with every year. Barney Dale and his wife were still with them. No thought of leaving Broome ever crossed the mind of either. Other servants might come and go, but they stayed on, nor ever dreamed of change.

At length there came a morning, early in the autumn of the same year as that in which John Brancker was committed to take his trial for the murder of Mr. Hazeldine, when Miss Letitia found herself unable to rise from her bed. She had been ailing for some time from the effects of a bad cold, but during the last few days the symptoms had become considerably aggravated, and now she could hold up no longer. Miss Pengarvon had hinted more than once as to the advisability of calling in Doctor Bland, but this Miss Letitia had emphatically begged of her not to do. Neither she nor her sister had known a day's illness in their lives; her cold was a simple affair which a few days would put to rights; no Doctor had set foot in Broome since the late Lady Pengarvon's death, now nearly forty years ago; and after the lapse of so long a time she was not going to be the first to have one called in. She well remembered that Doctor Grantley's bill on the occasion of his attendance on Lady Pengarvon amounted to thirty guineas, yet, after all, his patient died. Doctors were an extravagance in which only rich people had a right to indulge. But although Miss Letitia refused to see a Doctor, Joanna Dale, despite all her remonstrances, insisted on lighting a fire in the sick lady's chamber. Miss Letitia was terribly afraid her sister would look upon even that small luxury as a piece of wasteful extravagance, and her first words to Miss Pengarvon, when the latter went upstairs to see her, were, "It is all Joanna's doing. She would insist on my having a fire."

Miss Pengarvon let her cold hand rest for a moment or two on her sister's fevered forehead, and then she said in her usual quiet way, "If Joanna had been a woman of sense, she would have gone and fetched Doctor Bland without saying a word to anyone, as soon as she had lighted your fire."

Miss Letitia stared at her sister, and then in a little while she said to herself, "Barbara must fancy that I'm

far worse than I am, or she would not talk about a doctor in that off-hand kind of way."

As it fell out, however, no doctor was sent for till the following morning. Miss Pengarvon herself made her sister some gruel after a recipe in her mother's writing, which she hunted up out of a cupboard of odds-and-ends. Miss Letitia thought it exceedingly kind of Barbara, and drank a little of the gruel gratefully. It was not nearly so nice as the gruel Joanna had made her, but not for worlds would she have said so to anyone.

When at length Doctor Bland was called in, he seemed to think that his patient was suffering from nothing worse than a feverish cold. He advised her to keep her bed for the present, sent her a composing draught, and promised to call again next day.

"There will be no need for him to call after to-morrow," remarked Miss Letitia, still thinking of the expense. "Indeed, I am far from sure that there was any occasion for him to call at all. Poor people always doctor themselves for colds, and why should not I do the same?"

To this Miss Pengarvon made no reply. There was something in her sister's looks that made her more uneasy than she cared to admit, even to herself. She took her work into the sick woman's room, and sat with her all through the dull October day, and till far into the night. Miss Letitia was strangely drowsy, and could scarcely keep her eyes open for longer than a few minutes at a time.

"It must be something in this nasty medicine that makes me sleep so," she said once or twice with a touch of irritation. "I am sorry to be such poor company, Barbara."

Miss Barbara smiled a little grimly at this. At the best of times poor Letitia's company was never anything more than mildly depressing.

The following morning Dr. Bland found his patient no better. The feverish symptoms were more pro-

nounced than before. He changed the medicine at once, and promised to call again next day.

"If he were of opinion that there were the slightest danger, he would call again before to-morrow," argued Miss Pengarvon with herself.

The bedrooms of the sisters adjoined each other, with a door of communication between. This door was always left open at night, so that there was a sense of companionship through the dark hours which was not unpleasant to either sister, although they never admitted it in so many words. Miss Pengarvon was always a light sleeper, and to-night she got up several times and stalked into her sister's room—a tall, gaunt figure in a long white night-dress and a ruffled nightcap. Miss Letitia was talking a great deal in her sleep, and it was her half-sister Isabel's name which she mentioned oftener than that of anyone else. Isabel seemed to be nearly always in some great peril, from which Letitia seemed to be vainly trying to rescue her. Once or twice when she opened her eyes she did not seem to recognize Barbara; and later on, when she woke up and asked for a drink, she fancied that it was her mother she was speaking to, and that she and her sister were on the point of setting out to gather blackberries in the wood. A great dread began to take possession of Miss Pengarvon's heart.

Dr. Bland came as usual in the course of the forenoon. Miss Pengarvon followed him out of the sick woman's room. "My sister is much worse this morning," she said. There was a sort of menace in her voice, and a fierce, angry light in her eyes as she spoke, that half frightened the little Doctor. It was as though she implied that it was his fault her sister was no better.

"Scarcely worse, I think," responded the Doctor in his most soothing tones, "although, perhaps, there is hardly that improvement in her I had hoped to find. But these things take time, my dear madam, time."

"You know in your heart that she won't get better—

that she will die," answered Miss Pengarvon, with a quiver of her thin, colorless lips.

"Bless my heart, madam, I know nothing of the kind!" responded the little man, a spot of angry red showing suddenly in each cheek; "on the contrary, I have every reason for thinking that your sister will soon be quite herself again."

"It is very doubtful to me, sir, whether you understand her case. If she is not better by to-morrow, I shall call in some further advice."

"As you please, madam, as you please," responded the Doctor, as he took himself off in a huff. "Was there ever so much fuss made about an old woman before?" he muttered to himself, shutting the door behind him more noisily than as a medical man he ought to have done.

Miss Letitia's mind wandered a good deal in the course of the day, but towards evening her senses came back to her, clear and fresh, and the feverish symptoms seemed to be abating. Miss Pengarvon did not retire to her own room until past midnight, and then she left her sister in what seemed to be a quiet and refreshing sleep. A light was kept burning in each of the rooms, and the door between was left open.

Miss Pengarvon was thoroughly tired out, and was soon asleep. She awoke with a start and a sudden sensation of fright. The candle was still burning, and the clock on the chimney-piece pointed to half-past two. Everything seemed quiet in the next room, and yet, at the very moment of waking, it had seemed to her that she heard a sound as of someone opening a door. Still listening, she sat up in bed. A cinder or two dropped from the grate in the next room, and then all was silent again.

All at once the flame of the candle seemed to flicker as though caught by a draught of wind. Next moment Miss Pengarvon was out of bed, and an instant later she was in the next room. The candle there was still alight,

minute or two, listening intently, heard a noise as of a door being opened. Taking this sound as a guide, she went forward and then down the broad, shallow passage which led to the ground-floor of the house. Her instinct seemed to direct her steps to the Parlor. There was no light anywhere but the candle she carried. The shadows followed her as she advanced, only to fall behind her the moment she had passed. A plaintive voice was heard speaking from the darkness. "Isabel, Isabel, speak to me again."

Miss Pengarvon stood stock still for a moment and shuddered. Then, hesitating no longer, she went swiftly forward until she reached the door. The door was wide open; she had opened it carefully, as she always did, before entering at night. She gazed around with anxiety for the first moment or two, so faint was the light of her candle, it seemed to her that the darkness was all about her. But a second glance revealed to her that she was in the Parlor, clad in a dark-grey dressing-gown, standing on the floor against the old carved mantelpiece.

"Where is Isabel? I followed her here, and now I can't find her," she said, gazing questioningly at her sister, with eyes that were full of an eager, burning light—the light of fever.

"This is nonsense, Letitia. You have been dreaming. Come back to your room at once," answered Miss Pengarvon, coldly.

"Dreaming, Barbara! Oh, no, it was far too vivid for a dream. I had been fast asleep for I don't know how long, when suddenly I was awakened by hearing my name pronounced quite close to me, as if the speaker were bending over my bed. A second time my name was spoken, and then I knew that it was Isabel who was calling me. I sat up and gazed around, but no one was visible. Then Isabel called me again, and this time the voice seemed to come from outside the door. I got out of bed, put on my dressing-gown, and went out into the corridor. Still, no one was there. Then the voice spoke again, simply calling my name, nothing more; but this time it sounded further away—away down the corridor, and near the head of the stairs. While I was looking and listening, I seemed to see a white figure, very faint and vaguely defined, standing in the dim starlight, near the staircase window, and beckoning to me to follow it. I followed without hesitation, for I had no fear; and yet that seems very strange. As I advanced the figure vanished, and then, when I reached the head of the stairs, I heard my name spoken again, as if from below. Then I descended the stairs and followed the voice till it led me here—here, Barbara! Do you not understand?"

Miss Pengarvon's sallow cheeks grew still more sallow. She understood only too well. But before she could say a word, Miss Letitia went on in a strangely eager way:

"But now that I am here she does not speak. I have called her, but she will not answer; and yet she must be in trouble, for it was enough to make one weep to

hear the way she spoke my name. It is strange—very strange! She has brought me all the way here, and now she hides herself from me.”

“Strange indeed, Letitia; but we will talk more fully in the morning,” answered Miss Pengarvon, with an unwonted tremor in her voice. “It is very late now, and very cold; and we had better go back to bed.”

“But what if Isabel were to call again? What if she were really to want me for something?”

“I will sit up and listen, and if she—if anyone should call you, I shall be there to attend to the summons.”

“But you will wake me, will you not, if Isabel should ask for me again?”

“I promise you that I will.”

“Then I will go back to bed; though how you can say it is a cold night, Barbara, is more than I can think. I am all in a glow; feel at my hands.”

Miss Pengarvon said no more, but drew one of her sister's hot hands under her arm, and hurried her away.

Miss Letitia went back to bed as obediently as a little child, and turning her face to the wall, in five minutes was fast asleep. But there was no more sleep that night for Miss Pengarvon. She made up the fire, wrapped a shawl round her shoulders, and sat there hour after hour, as upright as a mummy—and nearly as motionless—staring into the fire with unwavering eyes, and conjuring up in the glowing embers, who shall say what strange pictures of the past—pictures, some of them, which for years she had done her utmost to forget, but which the torch of memory, kindled by her sister's random words, now lighted up for her again, as vividly as though the events which they depicted were but those of yesterday. How thankfully she watched the breaking of the coming day! Then the shadows that haunt our thoughts and weigh upon our spirits during the dread watches of the night take to themselves wings,

and vanish as though they had never been, before the first rays of the rising sun.

Day had not yet fully broken when Miss Letitia sat up suddenly in bed. In her eyes there was a light which seemed of another world than this. Stretching forth her arms, she said, "Oh, Barbara. The baby—the baby! So cold! So cold!"

They were her last words. She sighed softly, twice, and sank back on the pillows.

CHAPTER XV.

AFTER THE TRIAL.

AMONG those who had crowded round John Brancker in order to congratulate him the moment he was a free man was neither Mr. Edward Hazeldine nor Mr. Avison, and their absence caused him a little pang of disappointment. Edward had all along not only expressed his unflinching belief in John's innocence, but at his own cost had engaged Mr. Burgees to defend him, so that his absence on the day of the trial seemed doubly strange. John had seen Mr. Avison in court, and had looked for a word of congratulation from him when all was over, but he looked in vain. Besides, it was now Saturday evening, and he was anxious to know whether Mr. Avison would expect him to be in his place at the Bank at nine o'clock on the following Monday morning, just as if nothing had occurred to break the continuity of his service there. He was not, however, destined to be kept long in doubt on the latter point. Soon after he got home a note from Mr. Avison reached him, in which he was requested to see that gentleman in his private room at the Bank at half-past ten on Monday forenoon.

Next day was Sunday, and John stayed quietly indoors. It seemed to him the most blessed Sabbath he had ever spent. To feel that the prison walls no longer

shut him in ; that he was free to come and go even as other men were ; to know that the foul charge which had hung over him for so long a time was at length dispelled, and that he was back once more in his dear little home with those he loved best on earth—all made up a sum of happiness which was almost oppressive in its fullness. One needs to go through some experience analogous to that of John Brancker before one learns to appraise at their real value those common blessings of everyday life which to most of us seem so much a matter of course.

Clement Hazeldine called at Nairn Cottage in the course of the afternoon. He and Mr. Kittaway were the only visitors that day. It must be recorded of the latter that he had made a prompt offer to Miss Brancker of pecuniary help in case funds should be needed to defray the cost of her brother's defence ; but, as we have seen, thanks to the action of Edward Hazaldine, nothing of the kind was required.

"I thought that perhaps we should have seen Frank Derison to-day," said John to his sister, as they were on the point of sitting down to supper.

"Hem ! We have not been troubled with much of Master Frank's company for some time past," replied Miss Charlotte, a little coldly.

"Indeed ! How do you account for that ?"

"Oh ! I've nothing to do with accounting for it. I'm merely stating the fact."

"You surprise me. But perhaps there's nothing more than a little tiff at the bottom of his absence."

"If you mean as between Frank and Hermia, I must tell you that I don't think Hermy cares twopence about him in the way you imply."

John stared blankly at his sister.

"My eyes have been opened of late," went on Miss Charlotte. "Whether it's owing to trouble, or something else, I don't know, but I seem to see many things now in a different light from that which I used to see

them in, and you may depend upon it, dear, that if our girl cares for anybody, it's not for Frank Derison."

"Which means that she cares for someone else. But who is there?"

"What say you to Clement Hazeldine?"

"To be sure!—though I never thought of him in that connection. But do you mean to say ——?"

"I mean to say nothing, though I may have my suspicions."

"Don't you think the time has nearly come when she ought to be told?" said John, with a significant look at his sister.

"It will be a great shock to her."

"I don't doubt that, still ——"

But at this moment Hermia entered the room, and for the time nothing more was said.

Frank had his reasons for not calling at the Cottage on Sunday. A few days previously his mother had said to him, in her enigmatical way :

"Whatever may be the result of Mr. Brancker's trial, I think it advisable that you should keep away from his house just at present. I have my reasons for asking this."

That was all she had said, but Frank knew that she had paid one of her periodical visits to old Mr. Avison a few days before, and he could only conclude that the interdiction—for it was little less—which had been laid upon him, had had its origin in the visit in question. It was an easy matter for him to carry out his mother's wishes.

At a few minutes past nine o'clock on Monday morning, Edward Hazeldine's dog-cart stopped at the gate of Nairn Cottage. John, who had seen it from the window, walked down through the little front garden to the gate. The hands of the two men met in a cordial grip.

"I was not well enough to see you on Saturday," said Edward, "but I had a messenger to bring me the news,

of the verdict the moment it was known. I felt sure of your innocence all along, and the jury by their verdict have merely given emphatic utterance to that which all right-thinking men must have been convinced of from the first. I congratulate you with all my heart !”

“I have a great deal to thank you for Mr. Edward, and I assure you that both I and my sister are fully sensible of all that we owe to yourself and your brother in this terrible business. I can conscientiously say that it was your outspoken belief in my innocence, which all through did more to uphold and strengthen me than anything else. I can never, never forget what I owe to you.”

Edward sighed involuntarily. If John had but known the truth, what would he not have thought and said ! After a little further conversation the two men parted, with renewed expressions of good-will.

It was with a confluence of emotions which he would have found it impossible to analyze that John Brancker left home for the Bank. The familiar streets seemed as fresh and strange to him as if his feet had not trodden their pavements for years. On his way he met more than one friend who stopped and shook hands with him, and would fain have detained him, had he not been in a hurry to keep his appointment ; others there were who greeted him with a smile and a cheery “Good-morning ;” while others again—such as merely knew him by sight—stared him hard in the face as they drew near, and then turned to stare again when he had passed.

On reaching the Bank he avoided the general office, and going straight to the door of Mr. Avison's room, he knocked. A sigh that was half a sob caught his breath as he passed the unforgotten door of Mr. Hazeldine's room. What had not he gone through since he set eyes on it last !

A voice, which he recognized as Mr. Avison's, bade him enter, and he went in,

The Banker was a tall thin, grizzled man, with a natural stoop of the shoulders, a high, narrow forehead, features pinched by chronic ill-health, cold and somewhat glassy-looking eyes, a long upper lip, and a hard yet querulous-looking mouth. He was an able financier, and loved his profession ; and it was only in obedience to his doctor's positive orders that he had torn himself away from it even for a time. He was a man who prided himself on being strictly just in his dealings with others ; but your very just men are liable to forget that there is another goddess called Mercy, who is twin-sister to her at whose shrine they bend the knee. This was a fact which Mr. Avison either did not know, or else failed to recognize. Without being himself aware of it, he was what is commonly called a "hard man." For the ordinary weaknesses and foibles of his fellows he had nothing but a sort of cold contempt. Temptations such as those which are supposed to follow in the train of riches passed him by and left him unmoved. There were many points of resemblance, both mental and ethical, between Mr. Avison and Edward Hazeldine.

Although John Brancker had been acquitted by a jury of his countrymen, the banker felt far from satisfied in his own mind that John, without being the actual criminal, was not, in some way or other, privy to the crime. What fortified him in this opinion was the conviction, of which he could not rid himself, that the combined robbery and murder could only have been perpetrated by someone, or with the aid and connivance of someone, who had an intimate knowledge of the interior economy of the Bank. But even with such a conviction strong in his mind, there would have been no reason why, in his thoughts, he should have connected John Brancker with the crime, rather than any other member of his staff, had it not been for those other links of circumstantial evidence which made the case as against him seem so black, while failing to cast a shadow of suspicion on anyone else. By right, both of position

and length of service, John Brancker ought, in the ordinary course of events, to have succeeded to Mr. Hazeldine's post ; but with such a disquieting suspicion holding possession of his mind, and refusing to be dislodged, Mr. Avison felt that it was altogether out of the question for him to induct John into the onerous duties of managing-clerk. If only at his trial he had been able to disprove, or otherwise explain away, those damaging items of evidence which, when considered as a whole, made up such a black indictment against him, why, in that case he, Mr. Avison, would have been the first man in the world to do him justice. As the case stood, however——.

"Take a seat, Mr. Brancker," said Mr. Avison, indicating a chair on the other side of the table, facing his own. "Of course, I need scarcely tell you how heartily glad I am that the jury, by their verdict, have exonerated you from all share or participation in the murder of our poor friend Hazeldine, and—and in the robbery which formed not the least mysterious feature of the case." Then Mr. Avison paused to cough. With that ugly suspicion lurking in the background, had he any right, he asked himself, to congratulate Brancker on the result of the trial? Would it not have been much more satisfactory if the criminal had been tracked down and convicted, even though he should have been proved to be the man now sitting opposite him? But it was not an opportune moment for putting casuistical questions to himself.

"After, however, having taken all the circumstances of the affair into consideration, which I have done most carefully," he resumed, "it has seemed to me, Mr. Brancker, that you would be much more comfortable, in time to come, and more at your ease in every way, if a situation were found for you elsewhere, where you would be altogether removed from the painful associations connected with your late sphere of labor and its surroundings, which cannot fail to cling to your memory as long

as you live. In view of all this, I have much pleasure in informing you that I have been able to obtain for you a situation in a Bank in the West of England in which my half-cousin, Mr. Pencathlow, is a chief partner. Your new position will be somewhat more of a subordinate one than the one you have held with us, but with your industry and ability, you cannot fail to rise, and that rapidly. The salary, too, will be rather less than the one you have been in receipt of for some years past, but I am given to understand that ——"

"Pardon me, Mr. Avison," said John, with an unwonted break in his voice, as he bent forward and laid a hand heavily on the table, "but does all this mean that you are anxious to dispense with my services?"

"I have not said so, Brancker, and I think you have no right to draw any such inference," responded the Banker, with a slight flushing of his sallow cheeks. "What I have done has been out of pure consideration for you and your interests."

"I thank you, sir, for the kindly feeling which has prompted you to act as you have, but I am far from having any desire to break up my home, and leave Ash-down, where I have lived for a great part of my life, in order to settle in a strange place."

"But consider the associations, Brancker; the very painful associations which this place cannot fail to have for you in time to come."

"That they will be painful, I do not doubt, sir. Mr. Hazeldine and I were ever the best of friends, and there was no man in the world whom I respected more; but most of us have many painful things to bear as we go through life, and, in my case, this will merely be one more added to the number."

"Mr. Avison mused for a few moments frowningly, then he said:

"My allusions were not so much intended to apply to poor Hazeldine's death as to other matters. I was certainly under the impression that, after so terrible a

charge had been laid at your door, and after having undergone the ignominy of being imprisoned and brought to trial, you would be grateful to anyone who was willing to assist you to find a home elsewhere."

The color in John's face deepened and then paled. The look of bewilderment that had shone out of his eyes for a moment or two changed to one of indignation. He seemed to swallow something down, then with quiet dignity he said, "You must pardon me, Mr. Avison, if I altogether fail to see where what you term the ignominy comes in. Through a series of unfortunate accidents, some of which I frankly confess myself utterly at a loss to explain, a terrible suspicion was cast upon me ; of that suspicion my imprisonment and subsequent trial were the inevitable outcome. But, sir, the verdict of a jury of my countrymen has cleared me from any complicity in a crime of which you, knowing me as you do, ought to be one of the last men in the world to believe me guilty."

Mr. Avison chose to ignore the latter part of John's dignified protest. "Yes," he said, in his chilliest tones, "it is precisely because there are so many circumstances connected with the case which still lack explanation, that ——" Then he paused, staring with glassy, contracted eyes at John.

John started to his feet with flaming eyes and quivering nostrils.

"Do you mean to imply, sir, that any suspicion, even the slightest, still lingers in your mind that I was in any way privy to the death of Mr. Hazeldine?"

"I mean to imply nothing, Brancker. I am not in the habit of dealing in implications. After careful consideration of all the circumstances, I have deemed it advisable that you and I should part, at least for a time ; for which reason it is that I have interested myself in your favor with my relative, Mr. Pencathlow, who will, I am sure ——"

"Mr. Avison, not another word is needed," broke in

John, with an abrupt wave of his arm. "If those are your sentiments towards me, then, indeed, the sooner you and I part the better."

CHAPTER XVI.

A LETTER AND ITS REPLY.

JOHN BRANCKER's abrupt departure left Mr. Avison in no very enviable frame of mind. He was thoroughly dissatisfied with John ; nay, more, as he told himself, he was deeply offended with him ; but none the less was he conscious of a certain sense of dissatisfaction with himself. Although he had laid such stress on the fact that the trial had failed to clear up certain points of evidence which told strongly against John, and had brought forward that fact as an excuse for getting rid of him, and although he still failed to understand how the crime could possibly have been the work of a stranger, he was possessed by a secret conviction, which the recent interview had not failed to strengthen, that John Brancker was as innocent as he, Benjamin Avison, was of any participation either in the death of Mr. Hazeldine, or in the robbery which had formed part and parcel of the mysterious affair. Therefore he was dissatisfied with himself. The scales of justice which he prided himself on holding with such an even balance in his dealings with his fellows, inclined for once a little more to one side than the other, and he was conscious that their doing so was owing entirely to his own bias in the affair.

Such thoughts were not comforting, and with a strong wrench he broke away from them. John Brancker had taken his own headstrong course, and he must abide by the consequences. "For the future, I wash my hands of him entirely," said Mr. Avison, as he touched the bell at his elbow.

The death of Mr. Hazeldine and the enforced absence

of John had necessitated several changes in the Bank staff. Such changes, however, in view of John's probable resumption of his duties, had only been of a make-shift and temporary character ; but now the time had come for them to be made permanent. Mr. Avison had taken upon his own shoulders a great part of the duties of his dead manager. The next clerk to John Brancker in point of seniority was a Mr. Howes, who was a protégé of Mr. Avison, and, consequently, somewhat of a favorite, although no signs of his being so had ever been detected by the rest of the staff. Mr. Howes, who had performed John's duties while the latter was in prison, was now confirmed in the position at a considerable advance of salary. When he had given expression to his thanks and was dismissed, Ephraim Judd and Frank Derison were sent for.

Mr. Avison had never liked Ephraim, although no one, except perhaps the object of his dislike, had any cognizance of the fact. The Banker, in matters of dress and personal appearance, was one of the most fastidious of men, whereas Ephraim was careless to the verge of slovenliness. His clothes were of coarse material and badly made ; one collar and one pair of cuffs were made to do duty for a week ; while his necktie was usually either awry, or had its ends loosely flying. Both his nails and his teeth would have repaid more attention than he chose to bestow on them, while his lank, black hair, which he wore several inches longer than is customary nowadays, only tended to accentuate the general untidiness of his appearance. All these things, each one a trifle in itself, had yet, when taken in the aggregate, an irritating effect on the nerves of Mr. Avison. Then there were those terrible ears of his, and his peculiar mode of progression—although, of course, the fellow could not help it—something between a hop and a skip when unassisted by his stick. Taking him all in all, the Banker desired to see as little as possible of Ephraim Judd.

But, on the other hand, Ephraim was one of the best of clerks, industrious, painstaking, conscientious. Mr. Avison told himself that it would never do—that it was contrary to all his principles—to allow personal prejudices to stand in the way of doing what was right by the other. It may be that he felt the more determined to deal with him in a thoroughly just spirit because he was not without his secret doubts whether that was altogether the spirit in which he had dealt with John Brancker. Accordingly, the Banker now proceeded to inform Judd that he might consider himself as being permanently installed in the position lately filled by Mr. Howes, while Frank Derison was to succeed Ephraim. A substantial increase of salary would follow in each case as a matter of course.

Both the young men were profuse in their professions of thanks, which, however, Mr. Avison deprecated with a gentle motion of his hand. Then he said: "If you can see your way, Judd, if you really can see your way to pay a little more attention to the details of your attire, and—and to your personal appearance generally, upon my word, I shall esteem it a favor." There was something that verged on the pathetic in the way he spoke. Then he added: "That will do for the present, Judd. Derison, I want a word with you before you go."

Ephraim left the room with a very red face, and a tingling sensation about his ears as if someone had soundly boxed them. Frank turned not red but white. Which of his little peccadilloes, he asked himself, was he going to be "called over the coals" about?

"I have not conferred this promotion on you, Derison, without having very serious doubts as to the wisdom of doing so," said Mr. Avison, toying with a paper-knife and staring the young man straight in the face. "I trust, however, that you will give me no cause to regret having taken such a step; but, in order that you may not do so, it will be needful for you at once to turn over a fresh leaf. For one thing, you must wholly give up

frequenting the 'Crown and Cushion,' or any other tavern, and if you continue to play billiards, it must be at private houses only. I have made it my business to ascertain in what way you are in the habit of passing your evenings, and the result, I am sorry to say, is one which is far from creditable to you. It is not, however, too late for you to reform, but I need scarcely tell you that the reformation must be both thorough and sincere, and I must have ample proof that it is so. And now, to turn to another matter. You are a frequent visitor, I believe, at the house of John Brancker. I am also given to understand that Brancker has a niece—a more than ordinarily attractive young woman. Is there any engagement, may I ask, between yourself and the person in question?"

There was a momentary hesitation before Frank spoke. Then he said in low, but distinct tones: "There is no engagement whatever, sir, between me and the young lady you refer to."

"I am glad, for reasons of my own, to have your assurance of the fact. If you will be advised by me, you will be a less frequent visitor at Brancker's house in time to come. I don't know that I have anything more to say to you just now, unless it be to impress upon you the fact that your future rests entirely in your own hands, either to make or mar."

When Frank reached home that evening he made haste to tell his mother all that had passed between himself and Mr. Avison.

"To think that he should have set someone to play the spy on me! I call it mean and contemptible in the extreme," concluded the young clerk in a fine burst of indignation.

"You look at the matter from an erroneous point of view, my son," replied Mrs. Derison, in her unemotional way. "You may rely upon it that Mr. Avison would not have been at the trouble to act as he has unless your future were a matter of some concern to him. He

has warned you and told you what he expects at your hands, and you may rest satisfied he has not done it without having a certain end in view. That your future will be a brilliant one I think you need not doubt, if only you will be guided by him. He has put you on your trial, and the result rests entirely with yourself."

"All the same, it was a mean thing to set a spy to dog my footsteps," said Frank, sullenly.

"I do not doubt that you will live to see the wisdom of the step which you now denounce so pettishly. And now, as to Miss Rivers?"

"Well, what about her? I consider it a piece of unwarrantable impertinence on Mr. Avison's part to ask me whether I am engaged to Hermy, as also to advise me to visit less frequently at John Brancker's house. What can it possibly matter to him how often I go there?"

"Oh! Frank, Frank! when will you be able to see an inch further than your nose? Cannot you comprehend that Mr. Avison's interference in your affairs is dictated by a strong desire for your ultimate good? Do not his actions say as plainly as words, 'Only do as I want you to do, and I will set you on the high-road to fortune?' You ought never to forget that Mr. Avison's nearest relatives are all of my sex, and that in view of the delicate state of his health, as well as of the fact that he is no longer young, the question of a possible successor at the Bank, especially now that Mr. Hazeldine is no more, is one which must inevitably be much in his thoughts. I am glad you were able to assure him that there is no engagement between yourself and Miss Rivers."

"But there is an engagement between us, as you know full well. I was a hound to tell Mr. Avison that there wasn't."

"An engagement of a sort," replied Mrs. Dersion meaningly; then after a moment's pause, she went on: "It was only a half-and-half provisional arrangement,

look at it whichever way you will. At the end of a year either of you could cry off that might wish to do so; and now that the course it is to your interest to follow is put so plainly before you, surely you would not —— ?”

“I repeat it, I was a hound to tell Mr. Avison what I did. Hermia Rivers is the most charming girl I know, and I'm far from sure that I want to break with her.”

“Frank, you are a fool, and I have no patience with you,” said Mrs. Derison, in coldly contemptuous tones, as she got up and left the room.

But it was only to return to the charge a little later on. She did not in the least doubt that, in the long run, her stronger will should overmaster Frank's weak one, and that she should ultimately carry her point. Thus it fell out that, in the course of the next day but one after Frank's interview with Mr. Avison, the following letter was received by Miss Rivers :

“MY DEAR HERMIA,

“Never before have I had so hard a task as the one which confronts me to-day, and I scarcely know in what terms to set about it. Pray believe me when I tell you that to me the pain is very keen, though I cannot flatter myself that it will be anything like the same to you. In any case, I trust that what I am about to propose will, in the long run, prove conducive to the happiness of both.

“It is now upwards of a year since you and I entered into a kind of semi-engagement, which by mutual consent was to be kept secret from everyone for the time being, and was to be terminable at the end of twelve months at the option of either or both, unless it should meanwhile have developed into a bond of a much closer and warmer kind.

“Dear Hermia, I now write to offer you your freedom. My feelings towards you have in no wise changed. I still love you as much as ever I did, but I feel that it

would be unfair towards you to keep you longer under the bond of an engagement which I see no present prospect of being able to bring to its legitimate conclusion. In brief, I am too poor to marry, and am likely to remain so for an indefinite period. Rather would I keep single forever than allow my wife to deteriorate into one of those household drudges of which we can see so many specimens around us. That sort of thing I could not reconcile either to my conscience or my feelings; neither am I selfish enough to wish you to wear out the best years of your life in waiting for one who, the longer he lives, the more unworthy he feels himself to be of the great treasure of your love.

"I do not know that I can add more, unless it be to say that, should I ever find myself in a position to marry, you would be the one whom I should choose before all the world; and also that my heart still clings to you, and that, in writing as I am now, I feel that I am cutting myself adrift from all that has been brightest and best in my life.

"Always, dear Hermia, yours most sincerely,

"FRANK DERISON."

This characteristic epistle elicited the following reply :

"DEAR FRANK,

"The contents of your letter caused me very little surprise, and what I did experience was of a pleasurable kind. For some time past it has been plain to me that the tie which bound us, slight though it was, had become irksome to you, and that its severance would be hailed by you as a relief. To me, almost from the first, it has been as a chain that galled and fretted me; and your having written me as you have, has merely anticipated by a few days a step which I had fully made up my mind to take on my own account.

"To be candid with you—and surely in such a matter

candor is of the first importance—my feelings towards you were never of a kind to warrant me in entering into any engagement with you, nor do I believe that time would do anything towards effecting a change in them. A year ago I was led away by your impassioned words, and by a certain amount of self-deception on my own part, into believing that I might, after a while, come to care for you in the way you wanted me to do. But I was not long in finding out that I had made a great mistake ; and now you on your side have made a similar discovery. Let us hope that, taught by experience, both of us will be wiser in time to come.

“Always your friend and well-wisher,

“HERMIA RIVERS.”

This was not at all the kind of answer that Frank had looked for. Far from expressing the slightest regret, or indignation—he could have borne a little indignation with equanimity—Hermy seemed actually to welcome her release ! But, of course, as he told himself, he knew better than to credit her assertions. Her pride would not allow her to let him see how deeply she was wounded ; as was but natural, she tried to carry it off with a high hand ; but he was not to be so easily hoodwinked. All the same, the tone of her reply did not fail to jar against the self-love which was one of his most pronounced characteristics ; and not for a long time to come was he able to rid himself of an uneasy consciousness that his treatment of Hermia had been anything rather than that of a man of honor and a gentleman ; and Frank had a great desire to pose as both—as though the two were not synonymous—not only before the world at large, but in the clearer eyes of his own conscience.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE PROGRESS OF EVENTS.

In the press of other matters we have lost sight of Mrs. Hazeldine and Fanny for a time. The news of Mr. Hazeldine's tragical end came upon them with all the force and suddenness of an earthquake shock, shattering the little trivial round of their daily existence in a way which seemed to render it impossible that it should ever come together again. Not till the day of the funeral was Mrs. Hazeldine able to rise from her bed, but after that last sad duty had been discharged, she grew in strength rapidly, although no one expected of her that she should do otherwise than keep up the *role* of a semi-invalid for some time to come.

On the day following the funeral she was interviewed by an enterprising member of the staff of the county newspaper, whom, nothing loth, being indeed flattered by the notion that anything she might choose to tell the man would be deemed worthy of appearing in print, she supplied with an exaggerated and sentimental account of Mr. Hazeldine's last evening at home, not forgetting a description of sundry strange dreams she had been troubled with just before the sad event; and supplementing the whole with the mention of certain omens and portents presaging misfortune of which she had thought nothing at the time, but which had appealed to her since with all the force of neglected warnings. The narrative thus obtained, having been docked of sundry excrescences, and then touched up with sundry dramatic and picturesque details, was duly served up for the delectation of the public at large, greatly to the disgust of Clement and Edward Hazeldine.

In other ways, too, Mrs. Hazeldine began to find that there was a likelihood of her being "appreciated"—that was how she stated the case to herself—after a

fashion to which she could lay no claim during her husband's lifetime. Both Lady Glendoyle and the Hon. Mrs. Gore-Bandon—by neither of whom had she ever been noticed before—called upon her in her great affliction, and were most kind and sympathetic; while the Countess of Elstree in person made inquiries and left a card. Even at such a time, she could not help deriving a melancholy satisfaction from the knowledge that her mourning was quite correct and beyond criticism. Fanny had not been too much overwhelmed with grief to look carefully after so vitally essential a matter.

To Fanny the loss of her father was a serious blow in more ways than one. For one thing, it meant her enforced absence for at least six months to come from all those gaieties and social functions in which her soul delighted. At two-and-twenty she felt that such a waste of precious time was nothing less than a serious misfortune; and then she was beset by the consciousness that in mourning she looked nothing less than "horrid." It should not be her fault if her mother and she did not go into half-mourning at the earliest possible moment. In the way of half-mourning there are always some lovely things obtainable—delicate shades and semi-tones of color which would suit her style and complexion admirably. It was especially annoying that a certain event should have happened when it did, just as she had entered on a most promising flirtation with Mr. Gerald Darke, who had come down from town to stay for a month with a rich maiden aunt from whom he had expectations. Who could say what might not have come of the affair! As matters fell out, however, young Darke's visit had come to an end during the time Fanny was necessarily invisible. She felt that it was very hard on her, more particularly in view of the fact that for some time past she had given up flirtation for flirtation's sake, and always, nowadays—with an eye to possible eventualities—made herself sure beforehand that the game was worth the candle,

It was an unwelcome surprise both to the widow and her daughter to find that, beyond a policy of insurance for twelve thousand pounds, Mr. Hazeldine had left nothing behind him except a sum of one thousand pounds lodged in the Bank to which his services had been given for so many years. He was a man who never talked about his private affairs to anybody, but that he had died so poor was a source of surprise to all who had known him. The house, however, in which he had lived was his own, and that was now left to Mrs. Hazeldine for her use during life. With the exception of a legacy of five hundred pounds to his daughter, all else he might die possessed of was to be invested for the benefit of his widow, the interest accruing therefrom to be hers as long as she lived, and at her death the principal to be divided equally among his children.

It was not without many inward qualms that Edward Hazeldine allowed himself to become an accessory to the fraud—for it could be termed nothing less—perpetrated by his father on the Stork Insurance Company. But, as he told himself over and over again, there was no way of escape open to him. He felt as if he had lowered himself for ever in his own eyes when he had acknowledged the receipt of the Insurance Company's cheque, and had paid the same into the Bank in his mother's name. It was another of those downward steps forced on him by his fatal knowledge of his father's secret. Fervently did he hope it might be the last.

A day or two after the receipt of the cheque, Edward called on his mother in order to consult with her as to the disposition of the money. "What I propose," he said to Mrs. Hazeldine, "is that you should authorize me to invest the amount in the Four per cent. debentures of a certain Company with which Lord Elstree is intimately associated. By doing this you will come into receipt of an assured income of four hundred and eighty pounds a year."

"Four per cent! Why, my dear Edward, I made sure that with your financial knowledge you would be able to get me eight per cent. for my money—or six at the very least!"

"Oh, I could get you eight, or even ten per cent., readily enough," retorted Edward, a little grimly, "only in that case what sort of security would you have for your principal? People who are not content without a high percentage for their money must take the risk with it. Now, the investment I am proposing to you is an absolutely safe one."

"But four hundred and eighty pounds a year! I—I did hope that I should have been able to keep a little pony-phaeton."

"There will only be yourself and Fan," responded Edward, ignoring the latter part of her remark. "Your staff of servants might well be reduced, and I would recommend that you should let this house and move into a smaller one."

"My dear Edward, what are you thinking about! Remove into another house—and a smaller one, too—when only last spring this one was fitted throughout with new carpets and blinds? Think of the waste of money—I will not speak of the laceration of my feelings—which such a step would involve. This house has associations for me such as—as no other house ever could have. But—but that, of course, matters to nobody but myself."

Mrs. Hazeldine began to whimper in a gentle but aggravating way. Edward got up and walked to the window and stood there, turning over the keys and money in his pocket.

"And then, again, what chance would Fanny have of getting well married, if we were to go and live in some little cottage, which in all probability would swarm with earwigs and black beetles?"

"My dear mother, pray don't say another word about it."

But if he thought he was going to get off so easily, he was mistaken.

"Just, too, as I am getting round me a circle of friends such as I never had in your poor father's lifetime! Lady Glendoyle, and Mrs. Gore-Bandon, and others. What would they think if I were to bury myself alive in the way you want me to? I might almost as well go and live in one of the parish almshouses. I consider it most unkind of you even to suggest such a thing."

Edward ground his teeth, but refrained from any reply. He had wound Mrs. Hazeldine up, and there was nothing for it but to let her run down of her own accord. Presently he remembered an appointment, and took a hurried leave.

Although nothing more was said about the widow's removal to a smaller house, her son's strong will prevailed over her weak one as far as money matters were concerned. The twelve thousand pounds were invested in accordance with Edward's suggestion, and Mrs. Hazeldine tried to derive consolation from the fact that none of her fine acquaintances would know how very limited was her income. Naturally, she told herself, if they thought of the matter at all, they would put her income down as being at least twice the amount it actually was.

It was with a very strange feeling that John Brancker woke up on the morning of the day after his interview with Mr. Avison, and called to mind the fact that he had no office to go to, nor any work to do.

"I feel like a fish out of water, and not a bit like a gentleman of ease and leisure," said John at breakfast next morning, with a little rueful laugh. "Now that I have got back home and am among my old familiar surroundings, all that has happened during the last three months seems almost as if it had never been. More than once this morning I have caught myself look-

ing at the clock, under the impression that it would soon be time to set off ; and on coming down stairs I began to brush my hat in the hall just as I used to do every morning."

"After all you have gone through of late, dear, you must give yourself a month's holiday at the very least, before you even begin to think of looking out for another situation."

John shook his head. "It would hardly be worth calling a holiday, because I should be fidgetting all the time, and wondering what was going to become of us."

"Going to become of us, indeed ! To hear you talk, one would think there was nothing but the Workhouse before us. It is not often, goodness knows, that I insist upon having my own way, but I do in this. You shall take a month's holiday, going right away from Ash-down ; and if we find you too obstinate to go of your own accord, why then Hermy and I will carry you off by main force, and having locked up the Cottage, leave it to take care of itself till our return."

John was pottering about the garden after breakfast, when the Reverend Peter Edislow was announced. He was the Vicar of St. Mary's, the church at which John, previously to his imprisonment, had filled the post of organist for several years. He shook hands with John, and said :

"I congratulate you most cordially, Mr. Brancker, on the result of last Saturday," but there was not much cordiality in his tone. He was a thin, ascetic-looking man, with a somewhat sour and querulous expression of countenance. He regarded himself as the most ill-used person of his acquaintance, and pitied himself accordingly, while cherishing much inward resentment against certain of his ecclesiastical superiors who had passed him over time after time, when there was preferment in the air, in favor of others, altogether his inferiors—or so he was firmly persuaded—in point of

learning, eloquence, and sound doctrinal piety. He felt it to be hard—very hard—that his many merits should have received such scant acknowledgment at the hands of those who ought to have been among the first to accord them their due meed of appreciation and reward.

“Thank you, sir,” said John. “It is a great pleasure to me to hear you say so. One never knows until trouble overtakes us how many friends and well-wishers one really has. And now about the organ, sir. I presume it is your wish that I should take up my old duties on Sunday next?”

“Hum! Well, the fact is, Mr. Brancker, it is about your position as organist that I have called to see you this morning. We are very well satisfied with Mr. Plympton, who has been officiating during your absence—very well satisfied, indeed—and I think, taking all the circumstances of the case into consideration, that it would, perhaps, be as well if the existing arrangement were allowed to go on, at all events for some little time to come. You will not fail to appreciate my motives, I am sure.”

“All the circumstances of the case!” echoed John, blankly. “Pardon me if I fail to quite apprehend your meaning, Mr. Edislow.”

The vicar coughed behind his hand. “I was in hope that your own good sense would have spared me the necessity of any further explanation,” he said, a little stiffly. “If you are not aware, I can only say you ought to be, that although your trial on Saturday last resulted in your acquittal—a fact on which I have not failed to congratulate you most heartily—a very antagonistic feeling towards you still exists in certain quarters. There are not wanting those who say that, although the jury by their verdict avouched your innocence, certain suspicious circumstances connected with the affair have not yet been cleared up; and, in short, they choose to exercise the right of private opinion, and—and to assume

—But, really, is there any need for me to pursue this painful topic any further?"

"None whatever, Mr. Edislow," answered John, with grave dignity. "If such a feeling as you speak of exists—though it seems hard to believe it of one's fellow-townsmen—why, then, sir, I quite agree with you that my position as organist at St. Mary's is no longer tenable, and I will at once place my formal resignation in your hands."

"Ah! Brancker, it is a sad thing to say, but we live in a most uncharitable world. I shall be sorry to lose your services, but, all things considered, I fail to see how you could have come to any other decision."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A REVELATION.

THE Vicar's statement that there was a certain section of the good people of Ashdown who, notwithstanding the result of the trial, still regarded John Brancker with the eye of suspicion, was a great shock to the latter; and yet, human nature being what it is, it could hardly have been otherwise. From the day of John's committal to prison on the capital charge, the question of his guilt or innocence had been a burning subject of discussion—not merely among the frequenters of bar-parlors and tap-rooms, but at dinner-parties and tea-gatherings—through the gradually ascending scale of social life till the highest rank of county society were reached, where it was kept in reserve by judicious hostesses as a topic which could always be depended on to give a fillip to the conversation whenever it seemed in danger of languishing. Like all burning questions, it was not discussed without acrimony and vehemence. Those who avowed themselves firm believers in the prisoner's innocence were confronted by others who were just as positive with regard to his guilt, although these latter

were probably far from wishing to see their belief worked out to its logical conclusion. Then, again, there was another class ; that which is never satisfied unless it can back up its opinion with a wager. Thus it naturally came to pass that when the trial resulted in John's acquittal, all those who had professed themselves believers in his guilt, as well as that other section who were out of pocket through having wagered the wrong way, felt themselves more or less aggrieved, a feeling which was further intensified by the undisguised elation of those who had pinned their faith to the opposite view. Therefore it was that sundry people were even now going about hinting darkly at a miscarriage of justice, and averring that till certain points of evidence should be disproved, or explained away, no person of intelligence could fail to still have strong grounds for doubting the late prisoner's innocence.

When John Brancker took his first walk into the town after Mr. Edislow's call upon him, he looked at the world from a new point of view. All at once he had become sensitive and suspicious. He felt himself to be a marked man. It seemed to him that numbers of those who passed him in the street looked askance at him, or, worse still, purposely averted their faces from him ; and as he walked along his heart was a prey to a dumb, bitter anger which was compelled to feed on itself for lack of a definite object against which it could turn. If you have reason to believe that half-a-dozen people have done you an injustice, you can either meet them one by one and strive to prove to them where they are in the wrong, or otherwise you can afford to treat their opinion of you with indifference or contempt ; but what are you to say or do if the assurance festers in your heart that some hundreds of your fellow-townsmen regard you with an eye of suspicion and distrust ? In such a case you are helpless ; there is nothing you can either say or do ; you can only writhe in silence, trusting that for you, as for so many others,

the whirligig of Time will some day bring in his revenges.

That John, in the soreness of his heart, exaggerated the case as against himself, there can be little doubt. It was a part of his nature, perhaps a weakness of it, to be morbidly sensitive to the opinion of others. It seemed essential to the simple content which had hitherto been his portion through life, that he should stand well in the eyes of his fellows. He had been buoyed up during his imprisonment by the consciousness of his innocence, and by the certainty, which rarely deserted him, that the trial would result in his acquittal. It had so resulted, yet now that he was a free man again, a sheaf of poisoned arrows were being aimed at him in the dark from which he was powerless to protect himself. He put forth his hands to grasp his enemy, and encountered empty space. After that first day he took nearly all his walks among the fields and country lanes, and rarely went into the town till after dusk. His sister was not long in perceiving that something was the matter, and had little difficulty in worming out of him the cause of his unwonted depression of spirits; for John was one of those men to whom it is a relief to unburthen themselves to someone, and who find it next to impossible to live without the sympathy of those with whom their affections are bound up. What had affected him with a sort of bitter sadness filled Miss Brancker with a fine flame of indignation, which aroused whatever combative instinct there was within her—but to no purpose, for of all futile occupations, that of fighting against shadows is perhaps the most unsatisfactory

"We must just try and live it down," said John, with a patient sigh.

"Yes, and you eating your heart out meanwhile!" answered Miss Brancker, with an indignant flutter of her cap-strings.

"I really think that Hermia ought to be told," said John to his sister a few days later. "My intention all

along has been not to tell her till her twenty-first birthday, but that will not be here for several months, and in view of all that has happened of late, and, more especially, of the dark cloud which during the past few days has settled on my life ——”

“Of which I am quite sure Hermy knows nothing,” interposed Miss Brancker.

“But of which she is sure to hear sooner or later—in consideration of all these things, I have decided that I should not be justified in keeping the secret from her any longer.”

“She will be greatly shocked.”

“At first, I do not doubt ; but at her age she will soon recover. After all, the story I have to tell is like a tale in two volumes, of which one volume is all I can offer her. Where the other is, and whether she will ever find it, is more than either you or I can say.”

John fixed on the following evening for his revelation, as the three were seated alone in the little parlor after tea. There was a keen frost outside, but the lamp-lighted interior had all that cosy cheerfulness which we associate in our thoughts with mid-winter weather. John sat on one side of the fireplace, more engaged with his own musings than with the newspaper in his hand, which he used occasionally by way of a fire-screen. A little way apart sat Hermia, between whom and Miss Brancker was a small oval work-table. The spinster was busy with her crewels, while the girl was engaged in mending some delicate old lace belonging to her aunt. Now and again Aunt Charlotte would glance up from her work to Hermia's sunny face, who, all unconscious of the scrutiny and wrapped up in some pleasant day-dream, would let her needle come to a pause every few minutes as if to count her heart-beats, a slow, faint smile curving her lips the while, and the luminous depths of her dark-blue eyes becoming more luminous still. Then, with an almost imperceptible start, she would seem to call to mind where she was and the work

on which she was engaged, and for a little while her needle would move in and out of the lace with the unerring precision of a machine.

"What can have come to her?" queried Miss Brancker of herself. "She is not the same girl she was even so short a time ago as last week. Of course, loving John as she does, it lifted a great load off her mind—though neither she nor I had ever the least doubt as to the result of the trial—when he was acquitted; but is there not something more than that which so often causes her cheeks to flush and then pale again as they never used to do, and has set the seal of some secret happiness on her face?" Then she added, as sagely as if she knew all about such matters: "And what but one thing should there be in all the world to cause a young maiden to fall into day-dreams and forget where she is, and, although her eyes are wide open, to see nothing of what is going on around her! 'She walks in meads of Asphodel, and sunlight dwells in all her ways,' " quoted the spinster, who was still as fond of poetry as any girl of eighteen. And with that she gave a little sigh, and went on with her work.

It was from one of these day-dreams that John's voice, addressing her after a rather long silence, brought back Hermia with a start.

"My dear," he said, speaking slowly and softly, "do you ever go back in memory to that far-off time before you came to us, or try to piece together whatever fragments you may still retain of the earliest recollections of your childhood?"

The dazzling light in Hermia's eyes, as she turned them on him the moment he spoke to her, died out of them as her mind took in the purport of his question.

"When I was much younger than I am now," she replied, "I often used to try to piece together what, even then, seemed like the broken fragments of a number of dreams all jumbled up together, but I never could make anything of them. Nowadays, my mind

seldom travels back so far. Why, indeed, should it? I suppose everthing has been told me which it is good for me to know, and assuming that to be so, why should I trouble further?"

"Nothing has been told you yet," said John, gently.

A startled look came into her eyes. "Then something remains to be told," she said with a little break in her voice—"something about the parents of whom I remember nothing—nothing!"

"My dear, neither my sister nor I have any more knowledge of your parents than you yourself have."

Her cheek paled suddenly, "Oh!—Can that be true? And yet you are my uncle and aunt! How, then?" She stared helplessly from one to the other.

John drew his chair closer to Hermy's, and taking one of her hands in both his, pressed it tenderly. "Ah," he said, with an infinite pathos in his voice, "therein lies the secret—the secret which has been kept from you for so many years, but which must be told you at last." Here he pressed her hand a little harder. "My darling child—for so I may surely call you—it seems a cruel thing to be compelled to say, but we are not your uncle and aunt—I and my sister. In point of fact, we are no relatives at all."

Hermia's eyes were not bent on John, but on the fire, but just then they saw no more of what they seemed to be gazing at, than if they had been struck with blindness. Twice her lips shaped themselves as if to speak, but no sound came from them. A large tear gathered in the corner of each eye, lingered there for a moment, and then fell. John himself was unable to continue for a little while.

"And now," he went on, "having told you so much, I must, of course, tell you the rest, for my sister agrees with me that the time has come when you should be made aware of as much of your history as it is in our power to impart to you. After all, there is not much to tell, as you will be able presently to judge for your-

self." He paused for a few moments as if to gather his thoughts, and then resumed.

"Seventeen years ago, at which time we were living in the suburbs of London, my sister drew my attention to an advertisement in one of the daily papers, which specified that the advertiser was desirous of entering into communication with some thoroughly respectable and trustworthy people, who were willing to adopt a little girl about three years of age, and bring her up as if she were a child of their own. My sister and I having made up our minds years before that we should never marry, had long been desirous of brightening our lives by the adoption of a child, who should grow up with us, and be in everything as though she were really our own, and here seemed the opportunity we were seeking, ready to our hand. Accordingly, I at once answered the advertisement, and a couple of days later was called upon by a Mr. Hodgson, who, from the first time of seeing him, I set down in my mind as a lawyer. The result was that a few days later, you, my dear Hermia, were handed over to our care, and have lived with us ever since.

"Once every year Mr. Hodgson visits us at the Cottage, when he always dines with us, and you will doubtless remember having seen him here on several occasions. The object of his annual visit is to see you, probably in order that he may be able to report to those who employ him that you are alive and well. We were told, when you first came to us, that your name was Hermia Rivers, but beyond that we were told nothing. No hint whatever with regard to your parentage or family history has ever escaped Mr. Hodgson's lips, and it was understood between us all along that I was to ask no questions, and none has ever been asked. Two inferences, however, may be drawn which would seem to make it pretty clear that your relatives, whatever else they may be, must be people of some means. The first inference is, that were they not such, they would

hardly be in a position to engage the services of a man of the stamp of Mr. Hodgson. The second is, that although we were quite willing to take and adopt you without any payment whatever—and, indeed, to have made our doing so a question of gain would have been altogether counter to our feelings in the matter—Mr. Hodgson insisted that the sum of sixty-five pounds a year should be paid for you till you should come of age ; after which, he said, in all probability some fresh arrangement might become desirable. Accordingly, the sixty-five pounds has been paid punctually ever since, but not one farthing of it has been touched by us. Year by year it has been allowed to accumulate in your own name in Umpleby's Bank at Dulminster, where at the present moment, there stands to your credit a sum of over twelve hundred pounds."

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OLD STORY.

WHEN John Brancker had brought his narrative to a close, Hermia sat awhile without speaking. Then she got up, and flinging her arms round John's neck, she kissed him twice very tenderly ; then she crossed to the opposite side of the fireplace and did the same to Aunt Charlotte.

"Whoever my unknown relatives may be," she said, with a little catch in her breath, "they cannot care greatly about me. They chose to cast me off when I was a child, and they are evidently determined that I shall never know more about them than I do now. Why should I care more for them than they do for me, or, indeed, trouble myself about them in any way ? If they were to make themselves known to-morrow, I could never learn to love them as I love you, my dear uncle and aunt—for I shall still continue to be your niece, shall I not ?—as I have always been. Nothing you have

told me can change or alter in any way the relationship between us, or cause me to love you one whit less than I have always loved you. To you I owe everything; to my unknown relatives, nothing. As for the money, it belongs of right to you, and yours it must and shall be. Not one shilling of it will I ever touch."

"My dear—my dear, that is a very rash thing of you to say. Consider ——"

"No, aunt, I won't consider; it is a thing about which no consideration is needed. This money was given to Uncle John to help pay for my keep, and clothes, and education, and by every law of right and justice it belongs to him and to him alone."

"I could not touch it, my dear—that is quite out of the question. The idea of being paid for bringing you up! Such money would seem to me like a contamination."

"What, then, would it seem like to me?"

"But consider, my dear," again urged Miss Brancker, "what a nice little fortune it will make for you if you ever get married."

At these words a vivid blush suffused Hermia's cheeks.

"If I ever get married it will be to someone who knows my history, or rather, as much of it as any of us knows, and if he would demean himself so far as to accept a farthing of that money—well, if he were to do so I should never care for him again."

"It seems such a pity, such a very great pity," murmured Miss Brancker. "John and I have been congratulating ourselves all these years on the nice little nest-egg you would have when you came of age; and now, to think ——!" She ended with a sigh.

"Dear Aunt Charlotte, cannot you see, cannot you understand, how entirely out of the question it is that I should touch this money?"

"It is equally out of the question that John or I should touch it."

"In that case, when Mr. Hodgson calls next at the Cottage I will bid him take back his money, and tell him that we will have none of it, and that if he never troubles himself to visit us again none of us will regret his absence. We don't want his money, and we don't want to know his secret. My relatives chose to disown me when I was a helpless child ; now that I am grown up, I disown them !"

Frank Derison's letter to Hermia had come as a sort of shock to her, but it was a shock of pleasurable surprise. She had known for some time past that the image of another had usurped in her heart the place she had once believed to be Frank's, but which she had since discovered had never been his in reality. She had mistaken liking for love, as she had not been long in finding out when once the real and not the sham Eros had aimed one of his shafts at her ; and a growing certainty had taken possession of her that if, at the end of the twelve months, Frank should press her to make the bond between them "a nearer one still and a dearer one," there would be no response to his wish in her heart. How foolish she had been ! How severely she blamed herself, now that her eyes were opened, for having ever dreamed that she really loved him ! It would be painful, very painful, to have to confess her mistake, but if he were to press his suit no other course would be open to her.

The twelve months which were to bring the secret engagement to an end in one form or another had terminated during the time of John's imprisonment. At a season of such deep trouble all thoughts of love and matrimony were out of the question, but the moment John's acquittal was an assured fact Hermia began to dread that which might come to pass at any moment. The infrequency and shortness of Frank's visits to the Cottage during the time of John's absence, and the impossibility of not seeing how forced was the sym-

pathy displayed by him on those occasions, had tended still more to open Hermia's eyes ; as a consequence of which, when Frank's letter came to hand its contents filled her with a sense of glad relief. She could not refrain from kissing the letter, so unfeigned was her joy at the news it brought her. There was nothing now to hinder her from loving as much as she liked, even though her love should never be returned, nor he who was the secret object of it so much as suspect its existence. Just now she asked for nothing beyond that—to love in secret as much as she liked.

Clement Hazeldine had not omitted to note how few and far between Frank Derison's visits to Nairn Cottage had been of late, and he did not fail to draw a happy augury therefrom. Up to the date of John's imprisonment, Clem had rarely gone to the Cottage without either finding Frank there before him, or leaving him there when he went away ; but after that event, they seldom encountered each other. After all, as Clem told himself, it might well be that he had been mistaken, and that there had never been any secret understanding, as he had all along tormented himself with believing there was, between Frank and Hermia. Thus it fell out that John Brancker had not been many days back at home before Clem made up his mind to seize the first opportunity which might offer itself, and ascertain his fate once for all. His practice so far had not proved a very lucrative one, but it was growing steadily month by month, and old Dr. Finchdown had himself told him that he intended to retire in the course of next spring, and would recommend Clem strongly to all his best patients, as his successor, so that, what with one thing and another, he seemed to see a reasonable prospect of being able to take to himself a wife in eighteen months, or, at the most, two years from then. The more he saw of Hermia, the more strongly he felt to what an extent his future happiness was bound up with her.

The Fates are often kind to lovers, and seem to pro-

vide opportunities for them, as if of set purpose ; at least, so Clem thought when, two or three evenings later, he found himself alone with Hermia. John had gone next door to sit with Mr. Kittaway, who was confined to the house by an attack of gout, and Clem had not been ten minutes at the Cottage before Miss Brancker remembered that when shopping, during the afternoon, she had quite forgotten to buy some silk of the particular shade which she needed before she could put another sitch in the crewel-work, over the intricacies of which she spent so many placid hours. She must go at once, and rectify her oversight before the shops closed for the night. Hermia offered to go in her place, but Aunt Charlotte, while thanking her, was dubious about trusting to other eyes the selection of the one particular shade and no other of which she stood in need. So the young people were left to themselves, and it was a full hour and a half—though neither Clem nor Hermia, had it not been for the irrefutable evidence of the clock, would have believed it half as long—before Aunt Charlotte, who, in addition to her shopping, had found one or two friends to call upon, got back to the Cottage.

Much had happened meanwhile.

When Clem found himself with the longed-for opportunity ready to his hand, he shrank a little in dismay at the ordeal which faced him. Most of us can afford to be bold before the occasion, and he was no exception to the rule. It had seemed to him that it would be an easy enough thing, when the proper moment should have come, to give utterance, if not to all, at least to a portion of that with which his heart was charged ; but now that it was here, he found himself as one suddenly stricken dumb. It was not merely words, but ideas that for the time being had taken wing and deserted him : and yet Clement Hazeldine was a man not usually lacking in either one or the other. Clear-headed and resolute of purpose in all the ordinary concerns of life,

with a mind that was in the habit of marshalling its ideas with an almost mathematical precision, and a not unfluent tongue, he yet found himself in the presence of this April-eyed girl, in whose cheeks tender flushes of color came and went fitfully, without a word to say for himself. He raged inwardly, gnawing one end of his mustache meanwhile ; but his doing so did not mend matters in the least. Opposite him sat Hermia, busy with her needle on some delicate piece of embroidery. She, too, seemed to have lost her tongue since Miss Brancker's departure. The silence was becoming strained.

Then, all at once, through the party-wall between the two houses, there came to them faintly the strains of John's flute, with which, a moment later, were mingled the deeper notes of Mr. Kittaway's 'cello. His gout notwithstanding, it seemed that the ex-wine merchant was making an heroic effort to accompany his friend on his favorite instrument.

Presently Hermia and Clem looked up and their eyes met. The air that was being played was one which they both recognized. They had heard it first one spring evening ; heard it, softened by distance, as it was being played by some troupe of wandering musicians, and very sweet it had sounded. They had accidentally met, face to face, on the footpath which for miles follows the windings of the little River Dene, and Clem had ventured to turn back and walk with Hermia the way she was going. It was the first time they had found themselves alone together, and by neither of them would the occasion ever be forgotten. Then it was that a certain mischievous sprite, who had been lurking in their hearts for some time past, watching his opportunity, sprang full-armed and laughing into the light of day. From that hour Clem knew that he loved Hermia and she that she loved him, but neither guessed the other's secret until afterwards. How the softened strains that reached their ears brought back that eve as

if it had been but yesterday, with all its golden burst of self-revelation which had then flashed dazzlingly upon them for the first time !

The magic of the music gave back his voice to Clem. "If I were to live to be a hundred I should never forget that air," he said. "Have you no recollection of having heard it before?"

"I seem to remember having heard it somewhere," answered Hermia, with a finger-tip pressed to her lips, as if in doubt, although in reality she had no doubt at all on the point.

"Oh! then you have not quite forgotten!" he cried, a great light of gladness breaking over his face. "We heard it played, in the distance, that evening last spring by the banks of the Dene. I have often wondered what it is called."

Hermia could have told him its name had she been minded to do so. She had chanced on it one day when she was buying some music, and had at once recognized it, but as it was she kept her own counsel.

"Yes," said Clem, at length, as if in continuation of some unspoken train of thought, "I shall never forget that evening. It was then that I first became sure of something which I had more than half suspected for months before."

"My own case exactly," whispered Hermia to herself; but she went on demurely with her work, and did not even lift her eyes in response.

"Can you not guess what it was that evening made me so sure of?" demanded Clem, next moment, as he leaned forward with crossed arms on the table which divided them. "Can you not guess?" he asked again. He had made the plunge and was becoming reckless.

"How should I?" answered Hermia, with a little shake of her head, but still without looking up. "I was always a poor hand at guessing.

"It was then the sweet certainty came to me that I loved you!"

Again no answer save a blush, but to herself Hermia said: "And to me that I loved you!"

"It is a certainty which has dwelt with me ever since, and one that will never leave me while I have breath to speak your name." He was getting on very promisingly for a young man who had been as dumb as a flounder only five minutes before.

Then, almost before Hermia knew what had happened, he was on a chair by her side, and had one of her hands imprisoned in his. No wonder her heart beat tumultuously; indeed, so taken aback was she by his audacity that, for the moment, she quite forgot to make any effort to regain possession of her hand.

The hand was lifted to Clem's lips, and an impassioned kiss imprinted on it; then, indeed, Hermia strove to withdraw it, but to no purpose.

"Listen," said Clem, bending his face till it was within a few inches of hers. "I have just told you the secret which for many long months I have hidden carefully from everyone—from you no less than from others."

"Perhaps he has not hidden it quite so carefully as he thinks," whispered Hermia in her heart.

"You can now guess why I am here to-night. It is to tell you that I love you—a little thing to tell, but to me how full of meaning!—to tell you that all my happiness is bound up in you, and then to ask you whether you will try to love me a little in return."

Try to love him! Why, her heart had been his for months and months, if he had but known it!

She did not answer him in words, but raising her head, let her eyes meet his. He read his answer there.

His arm went round her and he drew her to him. As his lips touched hers in love's first rapturous kiss, they heard the grating of Miss Brancker's latch-key in the lock of the front door.

CHAPTER XX.

"WHAT WILL HE THINK? WHAT WILL HE SAY?"

MISS BRANCKER had scarcely been five minutes back at home before Doctor Hazeldine's boy came in search of his master. The services of the latter were required immediately at an address which the lad had brought with him; Clem must hurry off without a moment's delay. He would dearly have liked to give Hermia a parting kiss—it may be more than one—but nothing had yet been said to Miss Brancker, and such a proceeding on his part would certainly have surprised, and might possibly have shocked, that somewhat staid though by no means puritanical spinster. Accordingly, Clem had to content himself with a simple pressure of Hermia's hand, but that of itself conveyed a world of meaning from one to the other. As he was bidding her good-night, he contrived to whisper, "I will call to-morrow after my first round, and seek an interview with your uncle."

His words gave Hermia a certain shock. She turned hot from head to foot. In the great rush of gladness with which Clem's confession had filled her, she had forgotten all about the strange secret which had been imparted to her only a few days before. She had accepted him without telling him. What would he think of her, what would he say, when he learned the truth? How foolish—how forgetful she had been! He had asked her to be his wife under the belief that she was the orphan daughter of a sister of John Brancker. What would his feelings be when told that she was a "nobody's child"—that neither she nor those under whose roof she had been brought up knew anything whatever about her parentage or history, and that in all probability they never would know? Ah, if she had but remembered to tell him before allowing his lips to

touch hers ! In that case, perhaps—but it was too late to think of that now. All she could do was to intercept Clement on the morrow before he should have time to see her uncle—as she still continued to call John—and tell him all.

She was on the watch for him next day, and opened the door before he had time to knock. "Come in here, I want to speak to you," she said, as she shut the front door behind him, and opened that of the little parlor, the ordinary living-room of the family being on the opposite side of the entrance-hall. As soon as they were in the room and the door shut, Clem found it impossible to refrain from repeating the osculatory process of the previous evening.

Hermia's resistance was not a very determined one. "It may be for the last time," she said to herself with lips that quivered a little. "He may never want to kiss me again after I have told him."

"Sit there," she said to him, indicating a chair. "I have something to tell you which I ought to have told you last evening before"—(here she blushed and hesitated for an instant)—"before I allowed you to think that I cared for you a little ; only, somehow, I don't know why, I quite forgot all about it at the time."

She paused and drew a deep breath. Then she went on to tell him in her own words that which John and his sister had so recently told her, including all about the twelve hundred and odd pounds lying in her name in the Dulminster Bank, of which she positively refused to touch a shilling.

The young Doctor listened gravely silent, till she had finished all she had to say. Her dark-blue eyes, a little wider open than ordinary, were fixed on him with an air of expectancy ; the sweet curve of her lips showed a glint of pearly teeth between ; her bosom was rising and falling more quickly than ordinary ; evidently she attached far more importance than he did to the revela-

tion she had just made him. He gave her a reassuring smile ; then he said gently,

"Would it have mattered greatly, darling, if you had never told me this? As far as I am concerned, it certainly would not. Mr. Brancker and his sister will still continue to be your uncle and aunt as they have always been, and you will still continue to be their orphan niece. Nothing is changed. Of course, it is only natural that now you understand so much, you should be desirous of knowing more, and ——"

"But I am by no means sure that I am desirous of knowing more," interposed Hermia, softly, and yet proudly. "Whoever my relatives may be—that is, providing I have any at all—they have thought well to discard me, and such being the case, I do not know why I should trouble myself greatly about them."

"Your words are words of wisdom. Whoever the people may be who placed you with Mr. Brancker, and whatever the connection between you and them may be, it is quite evident that, for the present at least, they are determined to keep their secret to themselves, and that any attempt on your part to force it from them would probably be met by rebuffs and disappointment. As you say, why trouble yourself about them? Here are your true relations ; here is the only home you have ever known. Let them go their way ; all you ask is to be allowed to go yours without any interference on their part.

"You do but echo my own thoughts," said Hermia, with a heavenly smile.

"Which merely serves to prove still more clearly the affinity that exists between us."

"Ah, but have you sufficiently considered what you are doing—what risks you may be running in proffering to marry a nameless girl—for how can I be sure what my name really is?—about whose parentage and antecedents you know absolutely nothing? For aught you or I can tell to the contrary, there may be some

dreadful disgrace hanging over my birth, or attaching itself in some way to those who have thought well to cast me off. Think what it would be if, after your marriage, something should come to light which would make you ashamed of your wife, something which would cause you to wish you had never met her ! That would be enough to make her sorry she had ever been born, while, as for you ——” She ceased, her sensitive lips quivering almost imperceptibly, while a tear shone in the corner of each of her eyes.

Again Clement smiled. “My dearest, are you not making a mountain out of a molehill ?” he said. “It is a way your sex sometimes has. For my own part, I do not for one moment suppose that there is any disgrace, as you choose to term it, connected with your birth or parentage, or any secret which, if made known to the world to-morrow, you would have the slightest cause to be ashamed of. Such cases as yours are by no means so infrequent as you seem to think, and the explanation, when one is forthcoming, is usually of a very commonplace kind indeed. My advice to you is, to think as little as may be about that which Mr. Brancker has deemed it his duty to tell you—in fact, to treat it as though you had never heard it. You shake your head. Well, then, to adopt for the moment your own extreme view of the matter, do you, can you think that whatever may happen, whatever secret the future may bring to light, such a revelation can or will influence my love in the slightest degree, or make me care for you one jot less than I care for you now ? If you do think so, you must indeed have a contemptible opinion of me.”

“No, no,” protested Hermia ; “indeed I have no such opinion of you. You know differently from that. If such were the case, it is likely that I should have given you” —— A blush finished the sentence.

“The greatest treasure a woman can bestow on a man,” said Clem, as if he knew exactly what she would

have said. "No, it is not likely—indeed, quite the reverse. All which merely brings us round to the point we started from. As I said at first, it would have mattered little or nothing, as far as I am concerned, if you had never told me all this. So now, to change the subject ——"

His way of changing the subject was to encircle her waist with his arm.

"But about the money," said Hermia, two or three minutes later, as she stood before the chimney-glass, trying to put her hair to rights, which, owing to some accident, had become considerably disarranged—"about the twelve hundred pounds. Was I not right in acting as I did?"

"My dearest and best, it was out of the question that you should have acted otherwise. Whatever your uncle may choose to say, the money is not yours, but his. If it pleases him to let it accumulate in your name, well and good; no one can hinder him from doing as he likes in the matter, but his doing so in nowise alters the facts of the case. The money remains his just the same; he cannot give you what you are not willing to take, and this is a kind of gift, or so it seems to me, which it is impossible for you to accept."

"I was sure you would say so; I was sure you would think exactly as I do in the matter," said Hermia, with shining eyes. "What will uncle and aunt say now?"

"Which reminds me that I have not yet had my little interview with your uncle," said Clem. "But as I can't stay much longer—for a doctor's time is never his own—and as one should never omit to gather honey while one has the chance," he added artfully, "it seems to me that it will be better to put off my interview with Mr. Brancker till this evening, or to-morrow."

"Indeed, sir, but you will do no such thing," cried Hermia. "I begin to discern a certain selfishness of disposition about you, which I trust you will do your utmost to check while it is yet in the bud. I will ask

Uncle John to come at once, in case any of your poor patients should fancy you are neglecting them," and before Clem could intercept her she was gone.

On the interview between the young doctor and John Brancker it is not needful that we should dwell. Presently Miss Brancker was called into the room by her brother. The kind-hearted spinster could not help letting fall a few tears when told the news, although she had not been without her suspicions of what was in the air for some time past. "There is no one in the wide world," she said, with fervor, "to whom my brother and I would sooner entrust our darling than to you, Mr. Clement. And as for her, she is worthy of all the care and love which any man can bestow on her."

"On that point I am quite sure," replied Clem, earnestly, "and if I know anything of myself, she will never lack either one or the other at my hands."

Then John brought up the subject of the twelve hundred pounds. It would be such a nice little nest-egg to start housekeeping with, he said. Clem only laughed, and replied that both he and Hermia were fully agreed that the money belonged to John and to him only, and that neither by deed or gift nor in any other form would Hermia accept a shilling of it.

"Then hang me!" cried John, with what for him was a burst of passion, as he banged his fist on the table, "if I don't give every farthing of it to the Dulinster Hospital."

"I question whether you could put it to a better purpose," was all the consolation he got from Clem.

But already in Miss Brancker's brain a scheme was germinating for getting rid of the golden incubus after an altogether different fashion.

Said John to his sister after Clement had gone, "I am not quite sure, my dear, that we are justified in giving our sanction to Hermy's engagement without having first obtained Mr. Hodgson's leave to do so. There may be something in the background of which you and

I know nothing, to render such an engagement objectionable to Hermy's unknown relatives; for, of course, the dear girl must have relatives somewhere. I am afraid we have acted rather precipitately in the matter, and that we ought first to have taken Mr. Hodgson's opinion on the occasion of his next visit."

"You seem to forget one little fact, my dear, which is, that you could not very well help yourself," replied his sister, dryly. "You, at least, have no legal control over Hermy, and I question very much whether Mr. Hodgson has. I consider that it was very nice on her part to pay you the compliment, through her lover, of asking your consent to an arrangement which it was not in your power to forbid, or interfere with in any way."

This was a way of looking at the affair such as had never struck John, but he could not help acknowledging that there was a certain amount of force in it. "For all that," he said, dubiously, "I should have been better satisfied if Mr. Hodgson had known of and approved the engagement."

"When you adopted Hermia, it was understood, although there was no specific arrangement to that effect, that she should become to you the same as if she were your own child. We wanted no money with her, indeed we would not accept of any, and although Mr. Hodgson has insisted on forwarding a cheque every quarter, we know how each has been disposed of as it came to hand. I fail to see, therefore, what claim Mr. Hodgson, or those who are at his back, have upon the girl's future, or by what right they could, assuming them to be so disposed, attempt to exercise any control over her. If she needed to be controlled by anyone, which, thank heaven, she doesn't, you are the only person, if there is such a thing as moral law, who has any right to exercise authority over her; and Hermia herself would be the first to declare that she would

recognize no one's wishes, either in this or other matters, than yours."

It was only on very rare occasions that Aunt Charlotte launched out in this style, but whenever she did, John was wise enough to know that his only plan was to strike his colors at once.

He did so on the present occasion. "In any case," he said, "there can be no possible harm in my mentioning to Mr. Hodgson, when I see him next, the fact of Hermia's engagement;" and with that he made haste to change the subject.

CHAPTER XXI.

MILDEW AND DECAY.

LIFE at Broome reverted to its old monotonous groove after the death of Miss Letitia. At the funeral it was noticed by the few people who attended it that Miss Pengarvon never once lifted to her eyes the handkerchief which she carried in her hand, but her face was hidden by a thick crape veil, and no one could tell how far she might be otherwise affected. It is not the custom among families of the social rank of the Pengarvons for the female members to be present at the celebration of funeral obsequies, but Miss Barbara had always been a law unto herself, and that which she willed to do, she did. In the present instance, indeed, had she not chosen to follow the remains of her sister, there would have been no one to do so save the doctor who had attended her in her last illness, and the family solicitor, with—at a respectful distance and on foot—Barney Dale and his wife, who were mourners in the truest sense of the word.

As soon as Miss Pengarvon got back from the funeral, she shut herself up in the Green Parlor, and resumed her needle as if nothing had happened, and sat at work till far into the night, as though she were desirous of

making up for lost time. But from that day forward her sister's empty chair was always placed over against her own on the opposite side of the little oval work-table, just as when Miss Letitia was alive ; and as the autumn nights deepened into winter, Barney would sometimes hear his mistress talking aloud, as though there was someone with her in the room. She would ask questions, the answers to which were audible to no one but herself, or answer others which no one but herself had heard put. Sometimes it seemed to be Miss Letitia who was there with her, sometimes poor, lost Isabel, at others, that fine gentleman, Sir Jasper.

"It's all very uncanny, and I don't ken what to make of it," Barney would sometimes remark to his wife, with a slow, ruminating shake of the head—and uncanny indeed it was.

With Miss Pengarvon the love of hoarding had grown in intensity year by year, till it had become the ruling passion of her life. Now as always, her food was served up ceremoniously on some relics of the family plate, but it consisted only of the plainest and least expensive viands. With the passage of each year, the old house was becoming more ruinous and dilapidated ; nothing in the way of repairs had been done to it since Sir Jasper's death. The whole of the rooms, with the exception of the three or four occupied by the sisters, and the kitchen and domestic offices, were locked and shuttered and left to dust, mildew, and decay. What remained of the park was rented by a farmer as pasturage for his cattle. In one corner of the garden Barney cultivated a few vegetables, just enough for home consumption, but further than that no hand ever touched the grounds or shrubberies, which, in the course of years, had degenerated into a veritable wilderness, not lacking in a certain wild, luxuriant beauty of their own during the spring and summer months, but unspeakably dreary when the leaves lay rotting and sodden on sad-eyed, still November afternoons, or when the chill December

rains fell with dull, hopeless persistency, as over the deathbed of the passing year.

Early in January, Mrs. Dale died after a few hours' illness, and Barney had to send for one of his nieces, Lucy Grice by name, to fill her place. But the girl, after having been at Broome for a week, declared that she would sleep there no longer. The place was haunted, she averred. She had no objection to go there in the daytime and do what work might be required of her, but stay there after nightfall she would not.

Miss Pengarvon listened with a contemptuous stare while Barney explained the state of the case to her.

"The girl is a fool," she said curtly. "Of course the house is haunted, just as every house which has been inhabited by people who are dead, is haunted—no more and no less. You and she can arrange the matter between you as you think best.

Accordingly, the girl was allowed to go backward and forward, morning and evening, between her mother's cottage at Dritton and Broome.

A few weeks after the foregoing little episode had taken place, a stranger arrived one evening at the "King's Arms" Hotel, Stavinger, where he ordered supper and a bed. He was a handsome, well-preserved man of sixty-five or thereabouts, and of semi-military appearance. Next morning, after breakfast, he expressed a wish to see the landlord, and was accordingly at once waited upon by that functionary, a man about the same age as the stranger.

"Pray, sit down," said the latter, indicating a chair; "that is, if you can spare me ten minutes of your company."

"Ten minutes! An hour, sir, if you wish it. Since the coaches were knocked off the road there ain't — But I needn't trouble you on that score, sir."

"May I ask whether you have lived in Stavinger for any considerable number of years?"

"For half a century, sir ; a little more or a little less."

"In that case, you have probably some knowledge of the existence of a family of the name of Pengarvon—the Pengarvons of Broome, I believe they are generally called in these parts."

"There are not many folks in Stavinger or for miles round about but what have heard talk of the Pengarvons of Broome. A queer family, sir, very !"

"So I have been told," answered the stranger, dryly. "Who lives at Broome at the present time ?"

"Miss Pengarvon, sir, a lady getting well on into years, eldest daughter of the late Sir Jasper Pengarvon—with whom the title died, there being no heir male in the family."

"Sir Jasper was twice married, was he not ?"

"He was, sir. When he died he left two daughters by his first wife and one by his second."

"Just so. Now, as to the daughter by the second wife—she is still living, I presume ?" He leaned forward a little as he put the question, and seemed to wait almost breathlessly for an answer.

"That is more than I can say, sir ; more than anybody can say, I should imagine, unless it be Miss Pengarvon herself. Miss Isabel—that is the daughter of Sir Jasper's second marriage—ah, what a sweet young lady she was !—ran away, more than twenty years ago, with a gentleman who had been stopping for a couple of months at this very hotel before he and she disappeared. There was a fine to-do, I can tell you, sir, at the time."

"And did Miss Isabel never come back ?"

"Never that I heard tell of, sir. It was said that Miss Pengarvon forbade her name ever being mentioned at the Hall, and that she even went so far as to burn such of the poor young lady's clothes as she had left behind her. An old witch, sir, if ever there was one !"

The stranger seemed not to have heard the last

remark, but sat with his chin on his breast, pondering silently. Presently he roused himself with a sigh, and said :

"I am much obliged to you for your information. There is nothing more I want to ask you at present."

The landlord rose.

"About dinner, sir : at what hour would you like it?"

"Eh? Oh, yes. At five sharp. Anything you can get me. I leave it to you."

A quarter of an hour later the stranger sallied forth, with closely-buttoned overcoat, buckskin gloves and silver-mounted cane. After an inquiry or two, he found himself on the road which, among other places, led to Broome. A walk of two miles and three-quarters brought him to the Park gates, thick with the rust and grime of many years, and hanging askew on their hinges. A heavy chain with a padlock attached held them against all intruders. There was, however, a narrow arched entrance in the wall hard by through which wayfarers could gain access to the park, but the original door had rotted away long ago, and its place was now filled by a rude make-shift of rough unpainted planking, the handiwork of Barney Dale. A little way within the gates stood the whilom lodge, windowless and partially roofless, its flooring and other fittings having been torn away piecemeal by tramps and vagabonds of various kinds, who had a kettle to boil, or a savory stew which would be all the better for simmering over a fire of wood ashes. Nettles and dockweed were now the sole lodge-keepers at Broome.

The stranger, as he walked through the park towards the house, did not fail to note the further signs of neglect which were everywhere visible. The carriage drive was so overgrown with grass and weeds as to be barely distinguishable ; such few trees as Sir Jasper had left standing had been left unpruned and uncared for since his death ; here and there a few cows were

cropping the ragged grass. When a turn of the drive brought into view the front of the Hall, the stranger paused for a few moments to contemplate it. On that grey, sunless winter noon, with its rows of shuttered windows, it looked as if it might have held inside it not one dead person, but a dozen—not one grim secret only, but a score.

Miss Pengarvon, sitting at work in the Green Parlor, was suddenly startled by a loud knocking at the front entrance of the Hall. Never did that sound fall on her ears without recalling with startling vividness that December night, now twenty years ago, when she who knocked was repulsed with contumely, and left to find a winding-sheet in the darkness and the snow.

A few moments later, Lucy G'rice, after a preliminary tap at the door, entered the Parlor, carrying the stranger's card gingerly between her thumb and forefinger. It was the first time she had ever seen such an article, and she was at a loss to know the use or meaning of it.

"A gentleman at the front door, ma'am, asked me to give you this," said Lucy. "He says he wants to see you very perticular."

Miss Pengarvon took the card and peered at it through her spectacles.

"The name is altogether strange to me," she muttered. "What possible business can have brought him here?" Then to the girl, after a moment's cogitation, "You may show the gentleman in."

Accordingly Lucy ushered the stranger into the Green Parlor and shut the door upon the two. Then she retired a little way down the corridor and listened. The stranger's voice reached her as a low, deep murmur, but the walls were too thick and she was too far away to distinguish anything that was said. Then presently she heard Miss Pengarvon's voice as if in reply, rising gradually to a pitch of shrillness and vituperative energy such as she would not have believed possible in

the mistress of Broome. Involuntarily Lucy crept further away, and it was as well she did so, seeing that before the stranger had been more than five minutes in the room, the door was flung suddenly open.

"Leave my house this instant, and never dare to set foot in it again," exclaimed Miss Pengarvon in her harshest tones.

"Then you positively refuse to give me the information I ask for?" said the stranger, as if urging some point for the last time. "Let me beg of you to reconsider your determination."

"I have no information to give you, as I have already told you. Go; that is all I demand of you! Go!" Then, if Lucy had been there, she would have seen Miss Pengarvon with trembling fingers tear up the stranger's card and fling the fragments contemptuously at his feet.

"You may pretend not to believe what I have told you, but you are assured in your heart that it is true," he said, still speaking in the cold, level tones he had adopted throughout the interview.

"Lies—lies—lies! I feel no assurance of the kind. I place no credence in anything you have told me. Go, and never darken the threshold of this house again!"

Without a word more the stranger passed out of the Green Parlor, and the instant he had done so the door was shut and locked behind him.

"A fiend—nothing less than a fiend!" he remarked half aloud, as Lucy, with a scared face, proceeded to let him out at the front door.

Barney Dale, who had been away on some errand for his mistress at the time of the stranger's visit, was duly informed by his niece of all that had happened during his absence, as far as the facts were known to her. After Miss Pengarvon had retired for the night, Barney, perceiving the pieces of torn card on the floor, picked them carefully up, and succeeded, after a little trouble, in arranging them in their proper order. That being done

he read, "Major Strickland, Army and Navy Club, Pall Mall."

"I canna call the name to mind nohow," muttered the old fellow. "What business can it ha' been that brought him all the way from London to Broome? Not ——? No—that was all passed and over years ago. No, anything but that."

CHAPTER XXII.

EPHRAIM JUDD'S STRANGE EXPERIENCE.

EPHRAIM JUDD's mother was a widow. Her husband, a journeyman carpenter by trade, had died many years before, leaving her with three young children and a small legacy of debts. Help, however, had come to her from various quarters. A home had been found for her two younger children, both of whom were girls, in a certain charitable institution, while she herself had been set up in a small way of business as a clear-starcher, and presently enough work had come to her in that line to keep her constantly employed. At this time Ephraim was at school, an earnest, painstaking lad, who wrote a beautiful hand, and had a clever head for figures. As it happened, Mr. Avison the elder was one of the school visitors, and Ephraim being one of the show scholars, his attention was drawn to the boy; and thus it fell out that when the latter was fourteen years old, a position as boy-messenger was found for him in the Bank. There, in the course of years, he had gradually worked himself up from the lowest rung of the ladder to the position we now find him occupying.

Mrs. Judd still lived in the same humble domicile in which her husband had died, and Ephraim lodged with her, paying her a fixed weekly sum. To do the young fellow justice, he would fain have had the widow give up her clear-starching business, and remove with him to a house in a better class neighborhood,

"I can afford it, mother," he used to say. "There's no need for you to do another day's work as long as you live."

"And how should I contrive to get through the day, Ephy, my lad, if I had no work to do?" she would reply. "I'm not one of your fine ladies as can sit with their arms folded on their lap by the hour together. Thou must just let me go on as I have since thy father died, and instead of spending thy extry money on me, put it away in the Bank. Thou'll mayhap want it all one o' these days."

Mrs. Judd's two daughters had left the institution long ago, and were away in domestic service. Now, Ephraim, like a great many other people, had two totally opposite sides to his character. To the majority of people he was merely an ordinary, painstaking young clerk, but there were others who knew him under quite a different aspect. The fact was that Ephraim was a prominent member of a certain numerically small sect of Nonconformists, who for the purposes of this narrative may be called "Templetonians." They were not a wealthy body by any means, and their meeting-place was a large room up a narrow court in one of the least reputable streets in Ashdown, which had at one time been used as a granary. Like other and far more pretentious religious bodies, the Templetonians were desirous of making as many proselytes as possible; and, with that end in view, were in the habit, during the summer months, of sending out such of their members as showed any gifts in the way of extempore preaching and praying into the villages round about, where, on Sunday evenings, they made a point of "holding forth" to such of the rural population as cared to listen to them.

Among those rough-and-ready expounders of the peculiar tenets of the Templetonians, Ephraim Judd was one of the most popular and effective. He had that baneful gift of fluency which enables its possessor

to bury the platitudes and commonplaces which, five times out of six, form his sole stock in trade, under a flow of words which his ignorant hearers mistake for eloquence, and which, for the time being, imparts to what he has to say some of the relish of original thought.

It was a faculty the possession of which Ephraim had discovered by accident—it is almost needless to say that he regarded it as a special gift from a Superior power—but after he had once become aware of its existence, he did not fail to exercise it as often as an opportunity of doing so offered itself. But Ephraim was thoroughly in earnest in his preaching and expounding ; whatever his other failings might be, he was far from being a conscious hypocrite.

It was only during the light evenings between April and September that Ephraim and his co-workers could look to get an open-air audience together. Had they attempted to do so during the ordinary hours of morning service, the rural police would undoubtedly have ordered them to “move on ;” while on hot summer afternoons, after the heavy Sunday dinner, the bucolic inclination is for sleep, rather than for mental excitations of even the most rudimentary kind, however stimulating the latter may be when indulged in at proper times and seasons.

To say that Ephraim Judd was not troubled in his mind by the part he had played—or, as he preferred to put it to himself, had been compelled to play—at the inquest, and subsequently at the trial of John Brancker, would be to do him scant justice indeed. Circumstances—of his own bringing about, it is true—had so conspired against him that only one of two alternatives remained open to him : he must either tell what he knew, and thereby bring about his own ruin, or otherwise, by keeping silent, help to brand his best friend with the stigma of a most heinous crime. He was a moral coward, and when the crucial moment came, his

courage failed him. He allowed John Brancker to go to his trial, when a dozen words spoken by him would have gone far towards his exculpation.

Like Edward Hazeldine, he told himself that, should John be found guilty, then, at that extreme moment, he would unburden himself of his secret, let the consequences to himself be what they might. As it fell out, however, neither he nor Edward were called upon to make any such sacrifice.

But not only had Ephraim kept silent when it behoved him to speak ; he had done worse than that ; in a moment of weakness he had perjured himself—he had sworn to a lie. The Coroner had asked him whether he had seen Mr. Brancker leave the Bank after the latter had entered it to obtain possession of his umbrella, and he had replied that he had not ; whereas the fact was that he had remained lurking no great way off, until he had seen John quit the Bank not more than three or four minutes later. Since then, to make matters worse, from the ruin he had tacitly helped to bring about there had come to him both preferment and a liberal increase of salary. Small wonder was it that the young bank clerk was a most unhappy man.

On a certain Saturday evening towards the end of January, Ephraim was sent for to the house of Mr. Hoskins, the pastor of the Ashdown Templetonians. There he found John Iredale, an elderly man, a cabinet-maker by trade, one of his co-religionists, and the leader of the choir. Mr. Hoskins had slipped on the ice, and had sprained his ankle so severely that it would be impossible for him to leave the house for several days to come, and his object in sending for Iredale and Judd was that between them they should conduct the service on the morrow in lieu of himself. The former was to take charge of the preliminary part of it, and the latter to deliver one of those discourses for which his name was already so favorably known.

Ephraim flushed with pride and pleasure when told

what was expected of him. He felt it to be a great honor—the greatest that had ever been accorded him. He had plenty of self-confidence, and never for a moment doubted his ability to pass creditably through the ordeal. Although not the least bit nervous, he lay awake a great part of the night, thinking of the morrow, and turning over a variety of texts in his mind, each of which seemed to afford scope for amplification and illustration, before finally deciding on a particular one. Of course his discourse, like Mr. Hoskins' own, was to be wholly extempore: not a note or scrap of paper would he take with him to the desk—placed on a platform a couple of feet above the floor—from behind which Mr. Hoskins was in the habit of holding forth to his somewhat limited congregation.

It had never been Ephraim's lot to break down, nor even to hesitate for longer than a passing moment owing to a paucity of language in which to give expression to his ideas. Rather did he suffer from a plenitude of words, finding that his ideas—such as they were—were capable of being clothed in so many different suits of verbiage that he had often to put a curb on himself, lest, in the heat and fervor of his fluency, he should impose upon his hearers by giving them the same thought more than twice over.

A proud man was Ephraim when he arose and dressed himself that Sunday morning. For the time being the prickings of his conscience were forgotten, or perhaps it would be better to say that they were thrust remorselessly into the background. At length the opportunity for which he had so often longed had offered itself: to-day he would be able to show of what stuff he was made. Hitherto the majority of his co-religionists had only known from hearsay of the gift that was in him. At length they would be brought directly into contact with it, and would be in a position to judge of it for themselves. Evidently Ephraim Judd was not one

of those foolish people who are content to hide their light under a bushel.

Scarcely less elated, in her own quiet, undemonstrative way, was Mrs. Judd, who was a staunch Templetonian. It was far more, from her point of view, that her son should be an eloquent expounder of the tenets of the sect to which they both belonged than that he should be a rising official at Avison's Bank, with a prosperous and assured future stretching clearly before him.

The meeting-house of the Templetonians was filled this morning to repletion. Never had Mr. Hoskins succeeded in gathering round him so numerous a congregation. The news that Ephraim Judd was to discourse had spread in some mysterious way, the consequence being that there was a large influx of strangers belonging to the other sects who were drawn there out of curiosity to hear the rising young local preacher, the fame of whose untutored eloquence had not failed to reach their ears.

When Ephraim, who was seated on the front bench next his mother till the time should come for him to take his place on the platform, glanced round as the first hymn was being given out, his heart swelled within him. All these people had been drawn there to hear him—him ! Well, he hoped they would not be disappointed. He was quite aware that the audience of to-day was a far more intelligent and critical one than any he had been in the habit of addressing on Sunday evenings on village greens, and that he would be tested by a very different standard from any which had heretofore been applied to him.

The thought, however, did not daunt him in the least, but tended rather to elate and brace him for the ordeal before him ; for Ephraim had a good measure of that audacity, of that thorough belief in himself and his powers, which goes so far towards the achievement of

success, whatever may be the line of action on which it is brought to bear.

The portion of the service conducted by John Iredale was brought to a close in due course, and the moment came for Ephraim Judd to take the place of the latter on the platform. A general but decorous movement was discernible among the congregation. Some relieved themselves by coughing, others by blowing their noses, here and there came a putting together of heads and a low whispering. Mrs. Judd gave her son's hand a reassuring squeeze. Then Ephraim rose and mounting the three steps to the platform, he limped slowly across it, his eyes bent on the ground, till he reached the little reading-desk, where he turned to face his audience.

But first he bent his head and covered his face with his hands for a little while, then he stood upright and gazed calmly around. His face was a little paler than common, but his lips were firm-set, and his eyes clear and untroubled. At once he proceeded to give out his text, which he did in quiet but emphatic tones, so that not a word was unheard by anyone there. Then came a brief pause, during which his audience finally settled themselves; and then Ephraim, bending slightly forward, and grasping the ledge of the desk with both hands, began as follows:

"My dear brothers and sisters: we are this morning about to consider, from what to some of you may seem a peculiar standpoint, one of the most vital and all-important questions with which, as thinking and responsible beings, it is competent for us to deal. We are about ——"

Here the speaker came to a sudden pause; then, after a momentary hesitation, he began his last sentence again.

Then he faltered, broke down, began afresh in different words, hesitated, broke down finally, threw an agonizing, appealing glance round the startled, up-

turned faces of his auditors, turned deathly pale, and remained silent.

In one moment of time his mind had become an utter blank—an utter blank, that is to say, so far as his intended discourse was concerned. It was as though a hideous black curtain had been suddenly dropped between him and that section of his brain in which originated the thoughts and ideas it had been his intention this morning to expound and illustrate for, as he had fondly hoped, the spiritual profit of those who were there to listen to him. But thoughts and ideas were all gone, and in their place was nothing but an awful blank. Then, deep down in his heart, he heard a low, clear voice :

“Impious wretch !” it said. “How dare you stand here to preach to others a doctrine to which your own life offers so emphatic a lie ? You have perjured yourself—you have accepted the wages of a lie, and have helped to rob your best friend of his daily bread. You an expounder of the Word ! You a preacher of morality to your fellows ! Hide your face, vile hypocrite ! Go down on your knees, and crave forgiveness for your heinous sin.”

All this and more flashed like a fiery scroll across Ephraim’s mental vision in far less time than it would have taken to speak the words. He stood dumbfounded and aghast. To the eyes of everyone there he looked as though he had been seized with a sudden illness, and might at any moment fall back in a faint. Half the audience rose impulsively to their feet, while Iredale and a couple of “Elders” hastily made their way to the platform.

“What’s come over you ? Are you ill ?” whispered Iredale.

Ephraim’s sole reply was a stare. Then they placed him in a chair, and someone brought a glass of water. Then John Iredale, after a few words of apology and a brief prayer, dismissed the congregation. Before this

Mrs. Judd was by her son's side. All Ephraim said was :

"Take me home, mother—take me away from here,"

CHAPTER XXIII.

POOR JOHN !

MISS BRANCKER had told her brother that, whether he liked it or no, she should insist on his taking a month's holiday before he even began to look for another situation, and at the time she quite believed in her power to make him to do so. It was not as if he could not afford a holiday, for he had between three and four hundred pounds put away, which he had saved up month by month, a little at a time, out of his salary. But John in a situation and John out of one were two very different people. To have taken a holiday under his present circumstances would, to his thrifty notions, have seemed both a waste of time and a waste of money. Instead of enjoying himself he would simply have "grizzled," to use his own term, and would have come back worse in health, both of mind and body, than he went. Even Miss Brancker, after a day or two, was compelled to admit that it would be useless to press the point further.

John did not lose much time in setting about looking for something to do. His first proceeding was to call on Mr. Umpleby, the chief partner and manager of the Dulminster Bank, to whom he was personally known as one of Mr. Avison's most trusted officials.

No one could have received him more kindly than Mr. Umpleby received him, to whom, of course, all the facts connected with the trial and verdict were well known. While John went on to unfold, which he did without reserve, his reasons for sending in his resignation, the Banker simply interjected an occasional "Ah ! yes," or "Just so," or "I quite understand," but was

careful to commit himself to no opinion in the case either one way or the other. John had told him frankly at the beginning of the interview with what purpose he had sought him, and Mr. Umpleby now went on to explain that, highly as he thought of Mr. Brancker's business abilities, and greatly as he esteemed his personal character, he was afraid it was out of his power to do anything for him in the way he, Mr. Brancker, seemed to have half-expected he could do. In the first place, at the present time there was no vacancy of any kind in the Bank staff; and, in the second, even had there been a vacancy worthy of Mr. Brancker's acceptance, it would scarcely have been right and fair, as Mr. Brancker would doubtless be the first to admit, not to have filled it up from the ranks of the more subordinate members of their own staff, among whom, Mr. Umpleby was sorry to say, the chances of promotion were by no means so frequent as he would have liked them to be. This latter was a point which it was impossible for John to contend against: in a similar position he would have acted in a similar way. He came away with his hopes a little dashed, and feeling much less sanguine about his future than he had hitherto done.

The next thing he did was to advertise in the local newspaper for a situation, but although the advertisement appeared for three consecutive weeks, it elicited no response whatever. Then John fell back on the London dailies, or rather, on two of them, in which an advertisement, drawn up by him, made its appearance day after day with praiseworthy regularity, while, at the same time, he did not fail to wade through the daily lists of situations vacant. It was a heart-wearying task, as hundreds, nay thousands, of others have proved to their cost. Sometimes he replied to a likely advertisement; occasionally he received an answer to his own. In the majority of cases his age and his lack of general commercial experience proved fatal barriers to success. In other cases, where his acquirements

seemed to be the very things advertised for, and after he had been asked to furnish his name and address, together with those of his referees, would come the inevitable question :

"Are you the person who was lately tried on a charge of murder?"

On John's replying in the affirmative, the correspondence would abruptly cease. Heart-wearying work, truly ! For the first time in his life John began to despair.

Hitherto no one save his sister and his friend, Mr. Kittaway, had been made the confidants of his many disappointments. The knowledge had been carefully kept from Hermia. He was unwilling that the sunshine of her young life should be overshadowed by ever so faint a cloud, if he could in any way help it. One evening, however, when his heart felt more than commonly sore, and he and Clement Hazeldine happened to be alone together, Miss Brancker and Hermia being out shopping, he could not resist pouring the story of his trials and troubles into the sympathetic ears of the young surgeon. Sympathy, of course, was all the latter could give in return, and John asked for nothing more.

A few days later, Clem made it in his way to call upon his brother at Beecham. His chief object in doing so was to tell him of his engagement to Hermia, but he determined to mention John Brancker's case at the same time, knowing how fully convinced Edward was of the latter's innocence.

Clem found Edward in his office, and was glad to see how much better he was looking than he had looked during the two months immediately following their father's death.

After a little conversation, having reference chiefly to Mrs. Hazeldine and her affairs, Clem said, a faint flush dyeing his cheeks the while :

"And now I've an item of news to tell you which

may, or may not, interest you. I am engaged to be married."

Edward gave vent to a low whistle. "May I ask the lady's name?"

"Miss Hermia Rivers. I don't think you are acquainted with her, but you may, perhaps, have heard of her existence. She is niece to John Brancker, and lives with him at Nairn Cottage."

Edward Hazeldine's jaw dropped a little, and he sat staring at his brother for a few moments without speaking. "John Brancker's niece!" he exclaimed presently, but not as if addressing himself to Clem.

"What is there to be surprised at, may I ask?" queried the latter, with just a shade of annoyance in his voice.

"Has the young lady any dowry—any fortune of her own?"

"Not one penny," was Clem's emphatic reply.

"Hum! That's rather a pity, is it not, when there are so many well-to-do young ladies in Ashdown—you know how scarce eligible men are in these small provincial towns—among whom, and I say it with no wish to flatter you, you might have your pick and choice."

"That may or may not be the case, but seeing that there is not one among the young ladies in question whom I have any wish to make my wife, there is no need to drag them into the question."

"I was not aware that you were in a position to marry," said Edward, coldly; "that is to say, to marry anyone who has nothing but herself to bring you."

"I simply said that I was engaged to be married," rejoined Clem equably. "I mentioned no date for the ceremony. In all probability it won't take place for a couple of years at the soonest, by which time I hope to be in a position which will render my marriage with a portionless girl not quite such an imprudence as you seem, and perhaps rightly, to think it would be now."

Till that time comes," he added, smilingly, "I will refrain from asking you to congratulate me."

Edward sat trimming his nails. His manner implied, or so his brother seemed to think, that he either did not care, or did not wish to discuss the matter further, and Clem, on his part, was quite willing to let it drop. He was too used to his brother's little peculiarities of temper and manner to feel in the slightest degree offended at the way his news had been received. He had not deemed it needful to mention that Hermia was only the adopted niece of John Brancker. He felt that the secret was not his own to tell. It would be time enough to reveal it when he and Hermia were man and wife.

"The mention of what I have just told you," he presently resumed, "reminds me of something else which I think it only right that you should be made acquainted with. John Brancker ——"

"What of him?" demanded Edward quickly, his apathy gone in a moment.

"He is in great trouble and distress of mind, and well he may be." With that, Clem proceeded to relate all that John in his burst of confidence had told him a few evenings before. Edward listened with the deepest attention. When Clem had ended, he said hotly, "It seems a great shame, an infamous shame, that an innocent man should be so treated. To have such facts brought home to one is enough to make one despair of one's fellow creatures."

"Something ought to be done for him in view of all he has suffered and gone through, but I must confess that at present I don't see what that something ought to be," remarked the younger brother.

"Something must and shall be done," said Edward, emphatically. "Leave the matter with me to think over. I will either call on you, or drop you a line as soon as I see my way."

Although matters with Edward Hazeldine had gone so far well that John Brancker had been acquitted, while his father's shameful secret remained unsuspected by anyone, he was far from being a happy man, far from being able to boast of that peace of mind—untouched by anything more serious than trivial business annoyances—which had been his before his father's death. The secret he carried about with him was the nightmare of his life. Never was there a man less prone than he to introspective brooding, or the creation of imaginary troubles, yet, despite his native strength of mind, despite his persistent reassurances of himself that, after this lapse of time, after the authorities had apparently given up all expectation of ever being able to solve the mystery, and now that the whole affair seemed buried out of sight and done with, anything could ever happen which would reveal it to the world, and therewith the base and ignoble part played by him throughout—despite all this, the secret which he hid up in his breast was like a slow poison working in his blood, unstringing his nervous system, and to some extent, or so it seemed to him, devitalizing his brain. It was as if his ambition were paralyzed. He lived in perpetual dread of he knew not what. Any day, in some mysterious way he could not even guess at, the secret of his father's death might be brought to light. The monstrous injustice of which he had allowed John Brancker to be the victim did not fail to ~~still~~ rankle in his heart, an unhealed sore for which it seemed hopeless to find a cure. And now, on the top of all this, came his brother's communication. What was to be done?

It had been his intention to propose to Miss Winter-ton early in the new year, but with that black shadow keeping him company wherever he went and refusing to be laid, he had kept putting off the decisive moment from day to day till, for the time being, the opportunity was gone, Lord and Lady Elstree had left Seeham

Lodge for Torquay, taking Miss Winterton with them, and the date of their return was uncertain. Edward Hazeldine, although he would have been loth to confess it, was not sorry for the reprieve.

Ten days after their interview, he drove into Ashdown and called on his brother. He had not let the grass grow under his feet in the interim. He had been successful in obtaining the promise of a situation for John Brancker in the office of one of his friends, a London merchant in an extensive way of business. Mr. Lucas, the merchant in question, was under certain obligations to Edward Hazeldine, and had at once acceded to his request to find a stool in his counting-house for John, who was to present himself there on the Monday morning next ensuing. Thereupon he handed his brother a note of introduction, requesting him, at the same time, to see John as soon as possible and give him the note, together with the writer's best wishes for his prosperity and success in his new calling. He felt a singular repugnance to calling in person upon the man to whom his moral cowardice had been the cause of such unmerited suffering. It seemed to him as if he should breathe more freely when John was a hundred miles away.

John gave expression to his gratitude in warm terms for the service Mr. Edward had rendered him, and yet—and yet he felt that it would be very hard to have to break up his little home and sever the many ties which the habitude of years had worn into his daily life till they seemed to have become part and parcel of it. But there was no help for it, and when that is the case to murmur is foolishness. To meet the inevitable with repinings had never been John's way, and it was not so now.

There was no need, however, to make any sudden or immediate change at the Cottage. John was to go a month on trial, and should everything prove satisfactory at the end of that time, then would a new home

in one of the metropolitan suburbs have to be looked for and settled upon and the dreaded change made. Neither by John nor his sister was the probable change regarded with more apprehension than by Hermia and her lover. They would be parted; they could only hope to see each other at infrequent intervals; the thought was infinitely bitter to both, but it was a bitterness which they kept to themselves and only spoke of to each other. Not for worlds would they have added to the weight of regret which Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte had put up with already.

Monday morning came in due course, and John took his departure for London by the seven o'clock train.

CHAPTER XXIV.

ENTER MR. HODGSON.

MENTION has been made of a certain Mr. Hodgson, as being the intermediary through whom John Brancker and his sister received into their charge and keeping the little three-years-old child, Hermia Rivers. It has also been told how the said Mr. Hodgson was in the habit of calling upon John once a year, apparently with the object of satisfying himself that Hermia was alive and well, and that everything, as far as she was concerned, was progressing satisfactorily.

Mr. Hodgson's annual visit, the date of which he made a point of communicating to John beforehand, had nearly always taken place during the month of April, but this year he wrote some weeks earlier than usual to announce that he might be looked for at Nairn Cottage on the following day. The letter came to hand about a week after John's departure for London; but Miss Brancker, feeling sure who it was from, made no scruple about opening it.

The notice given was so short that there was no time to communicate with John previously to Mr. Hodgson's

arrival, so Miss Brancker, who had met the lawyer several times already, made up her mind to "tackle" him single-handed; indeed, she was rather glad than otherwise that on this occasion her brother happened to be out of the way. More than once since a certain discussion John had avowed his intention of turning over the twelve hundred pounds to Mr. Hodgson when next he saw him, and after explaining to him of what it consisted, telling him in plain terms that he would have nothing more to do with it. Miss Brancker, however, had other views in her mind as to the ultimate destination of the money of which she said nothing to anyone, and she was determined not to touch on the question with Mr. Hodgson.

There was one point as to which she decided that it might be advisable to enlighten her visitor. She would make no secret of Hermia's engagement to Clement Hazeldine. If the girl had any parents or near relatives living, it seemed no more than right—their having discarded her when a child, notwithstanding—that such an important event in her life should be made known to them, although whether it would receive their sanction, supposing them to interest themselves in the matter at all, and what would be the result if it did not, were questions which the future alone could determine.

"In any case," said the spinster to herself, "if my telling Mr. Hodgson results in nothing else, it may, perhaps, have the effect of bringing to light some facts connected with Hermia's parentage and the history of her early years. If the knowledge that she is engaged to be married fails to do so, we may give up all hope of ever learning more than we know at present."

Mr. Hodgson presented himself at the Cottage in due course. He was a thin, dried-up atomy of a man, apparently close on seventy years of age, with a very remarkably developed aquiline nose—a nose which not infrequently caused irreverent boys to make rude remarks as he passed them in the street. Miss Brancker

had told Hermia that she was expecting him, and although the girl's color changed for the moment, she received the news with a sort of proud indifference, and as though it were a matter which could be of no possible concern to her.

"As it happens, Mr. Hodgson, my brother is away in London just now on important business," said Aunt Charlotte, "and, consequently, will be unable to see you."

"Aye, aye ; is that so ? Well, he could not have left me a more charming substitute," replied the lawyer, with a touch of old-fashioned gallantry. "And how is Missy ?"—it was the term he had always applied to Hermia when she was a schoolgirl—"quite well and hearty, I trust."

"Quite well, sir, I am happy to say. But probably you would like to see her."

"For a couple of minutes, if you have no objection, dear madam. I will not detain her long."

It had been the practice for Mr. Hodgson to dine at Nairn Cottage on each recurring annual visit, but John being away, it seemed to Miss Brancker out of the question that he should do so in the present instance. She had not, however, forgotten her visitor's fondness for old port, and a decanter of it, together with a plate of biscuits, was now brought in ; whereupon, in obedience to his hostess's request, the old gentleman, nothing loth, proceeded to pour out for himself a glass of wine.

Then Miss Brancker rang the bell again, and a few seconds later Hermia, who had been expecting the summons, entered the room. A faint flush suffused her cheeks, but her manner was perfectly cool and composed.

Mr. Hodgson stood up and extended a withered hand, and peered at her through his gold-rimmed spectacles. "Well, my dear, I trust that I see you in perfect health," he began ; "but, indeed, you cannot be otherwise, if

eyes and cheeks may be believed, and I am not aware that they are in the habit of telling untruths. Upon my word, you are vastly improved—you may allow an old man to say so without offence—vastly improved since I saw you last."

Hermia murmured something, withdrew her hand, and sat down a little distance away.

Then there followed a little conversation, chiefly about the weather and such-like indifferent topics, in which Hermia took no part, while Mr. Hodgson indulged in occasional appreciative sips at his wine. Now that Hermia had been told the object of his yearly visits, she could not help regarding him with a certain amount of curiosity and interest. In the brain behind that withered mask of a face lay hidden the secret of her birth and parentage; those pinched lips, had they but so willed, could doubtless have told her something about the mother of whom she retained no faintest recollection, if it were only her name and whether she was living or dead. But no question on the subject should ever escape her; the knowledge must come to her unsought if it were ever to come at all.

Presently a timid ring at the front door made itself heard. "It is Mrs. Nokes," said Aunt Charlotte to Hermia. "Will you attend to her, dear?"

Mrs. Nokes was one of Miss Brancker's weekly pensioners. Hermia was glad of an excuse for escaping from the room.

"There is one circumstance, Mr. Hodgson, which it may, perhaps, be as well to mention to you," said Miss Brancker, as soon as they were alone. "Hermia is engaged to be married.

The old gentleman fairly jumped in his chair. "Bless my heart! Engaged to be married? You surprise me, madam—you surprise me greatly! Why was I not communicated with before now? Why was I not consulted? Why ——?"

"My dear sir, you seem to forget that you have never

and I dreamed when I was here last that the sort was likely to happen I would certainly have left you an address through which you could have communicated with me. But before discussing further, I should like to be informed who and what person is on whom Miss Rivers has seen fit to bestow her affections."

Thereupon Miss Brancker proceeded to show him : and one may be sure that the portrait of Hazeldine which she drew for her visitor lacking only the score of eulogy. The old lawyer listened in silence ; when she had done, he said :

"Then, it is your opinion that Miss Rivers is too earnest in this affair, and that it is not one of those engagements into which—so I have been given to understand—numbers of young women drift for something better to do ; and from which they are rescued if circumstances run contrary to their wishes. Whole and fancy-free, ready and eager to engage in a new fray again, only, of course, with a different St. Hermia."

Hermia has nothing in common with the young women to whom you refer. That her affections are very deeply involved I am as certain as I am of anything."

present I can offer no decided opinion. As you will have surmised long ago, I am not acting in Miss Rivers' affairs for myself alone. I am merely an instrument, whose function it is to carry out the instructions deputed to me by others. All I can say just now is, that you shall hear from me at the earliest possible moment, and that, till then, matters may as well remain as they are."

After Mr. Hodgson was gone, Miss Brancker did not fail to call to mind that he had never once made the slightest allusion to John's imprisonment and trial; and, furthermore, that the name of Hazeldine had seemed to awake no echo in his memory of the dread tragedy with which it had been associated so short a time before. Was his silence due to the fact that the annals of crime possessed no interest for him, and that he shunned the reading of them; or was it simply the result of a failure of memory? Of course, another theory was possible—that he had read and recollected everything bearing on the murder and trial, and that he was silent about them of set purpose. In any case, it was open to Miss Brancker to adopt which of the three theories might seem most feasible to her.

Four days later the afternoon post brought Miss Brancker a letter from Mr. Hodgson, in which she was informed that the engagement between Miss Rivers and Mr. Clement Hazeldine must at once be broken off, the young lady's friends having other views and intentions with regard to her future, which would be made known at the proper time. The writer, it was added, would feel obliged by an immediate reply assuring him that the instructions conveyed in his communication had been duly carried out.

Aunt Charlotte gave the letter to Hermia to read, and she, as a matter of course, passed it on to her lover, when he arrived at the Cottage the same evening. Then Aunt Charlotte left them alone for half an hour in order to afford them an opportunity of discussing the

letter by themselves. When she re-entered the room, Hermia said at once,

"We utterly decline, Clement and I, to have our destinies ruled and controlled by an unknown autocrat, who, for anything we know to the contrary, may have no legal or moral right whatever to interpose between us. For my own part—and I want you to tell Mr. Hodgson so—I altogether refuse to consider the question in any way until I know clearly for whom he is acting, and the relationship which exists between the person or persons in question and myself. Until I am enlightened on those points, matters between myself and Clement will remain on precisely the same footing that they are on now."

Then, after a momentary pause, she added, with a heightened color, and a smile directed at her lover: "Not that it will make the slightest difference even if Mr. Hodgson chooses to tell me all there is to tell. I shall be of age in a few months, and my own mistress. The day has gone by for either Mr. Hodgson, or those who hide themselves behind him, to interfere with my destiny in any way."

She spoke with the happy confidence of her sex and age. Experience had not yet taught her that the threads which unite us to our fellows, although to all seeming as fine as those of a spider's web, may, any one of them, prove strong enough to bind us round and round like so many helpless flies, and with just as little possibility of escape.

"John will be home on Saturday," said Aunt Charlotte. "He will know in what terms to answer the letter far better than I."

The answer was to be addressed to the care of a certain firm of solicitors in Bedford Row, London.

John Brancker's month on trial was at an end, and he had written to his sister to say that she might expect him home in the course of Saturday afternoon.

"No doubt he will have to return by the first train

on Monday morning," said Miss Brancker to Hermia when she had read the note.

As it happened, one of the first people whom John recognized on alighting at Ashdown station was Edward Hazeldine. They had travelled by the same train without either being aware of the other's presence. Edward saw John at the same moment. He was a little surprised at seeing him there, but at once went up and shook hands with him.

"Glad to see you, Mr. Brancker," he said, heartily. "Hope you are getting on all right in your new berth and that the work is to your liking. I suppose you have come down to spend the week-end with your people."

"I've come down for good, Mr. Edward. I'm not going back," answered John, gravely.

"Not going back!" echoed Edward, surprised, and it may be, a little dismayed. "I was certainly under the impression that you were settled with my friend Lucas for years to come, if not for life. But how has it come about? What has happened to hinder you from going back?"

It was merely the old story over again that John had to tell. For a week or more all had gone well with him. He liked his work and he liked his fellow clerks, but presently the fact oozed out somehow that John was the man who had so recently stood his trial for what was known as "the Ashdown murder," and from that moment his fate was sealed. First one and then another of the staff declined to associate with him, or to have anything to do with him beyond what was absolutely necessitated by the exigencies of business; in point of fact, poor John was completely boycotted.

"I couldn't stand another month of it, Mr. Edward; it would kill me," he said in conclusion in a quavering voice. "It seems no use trying any more. I must either stay where I am, in the hope of being able to live down the prejudice against me, or else go right

away to the other side of the world. There appears to be no other choice left me."

CHAPTER XXV.

EPHRAIM JUDD'S REMORSE.

EPHRAIM JUDD's breakdown and collapse on that memorable Sunday morning was attributed by everyone there, except the unhappy young man himself, to a sudden attack of illness, and many were the inquiries at his mother's house later in the day by sympathizing Templetonians, who were afraid lest his unaccountable seizure might result in something still more serious. But Ephraim arose next morning and set out for the Bank at his usual time, to outward seeming as well as ever he had been, but with an inner consciousness pervading every fibre of his being, that never again would he be the same man that yesterday morning had seen him. The "gift" on which he had secretly prided himself more than on aught else life held for him, had been recalled without a moment's warning. The fountain of living water had been suddenly dried up within him. Now that by his own act he had rendered himself no longer worthy to preach the "Word" to others, the power of doing so had been withheld from him. He knew as well as if a thousand voices had dinned the fact into his ears, although others knew it not, that he stood condemned at the bar of his own conscience, as one who had wandered from the right path, for whom there was no return possible, save through the narrow gateway of confession and full acknowledgment of his grievous fault. His despair, although unseen of anyone, was none the less profound and abiding.

That winter was a long and inclement one. About the middle of March, Ephraim caught a severe cold, which he would probably have got rid of in the course of a few days—as he had of many previous colds—had

he but taken ordinary care of himself, As it fell out, however, he neglected to do so, being at the time in one of those moods in which whether one lives or dies seems a matter of equal indifference. His cold became worse, and presently developed into an acute attack of pneumonia. Then, without saying a word to her son, Mrs. Judd sent for Dr. Hazeldine.

Ephraim's face flushed suddenly, and then as suddenly paled, when Clement was ushered into his room. A very brief examination sufficed to convince the young surgeon that his patient was in a somewhat critical condition. Ephraim's chest had always been delicate, besides which, at the best of times, his general health had never been robust ; so that it now became a question whether his constitution would not succumb to an attack from which a stronger man would have rallied without much difficulty. There was one point in his favor ; he had two capital nurses in Mrs. Judd and her daughter Eliza, the latter of whom chanced just then to be at home, while looking out for another situation.

Next morning Ephraim was decidedly worse. His bright, feverish eyes, fixed intently on Doctor Hazeldine's face, did not fail to note the grave expression which crept over it like a shadow, while listening to his patient's labored breathing, and counting the quickened beats of his pulse. Then Ephraim drew his own inference, which was little more than a confirmation of the doubts—one could scarcely have called them fears—which had beset him almost from the beginning of his illness.

"I am going to die," he said to himself, "and Clement Hazeldine know it. But, first of all, I've something to say to him."

"Yes, I had only a poor night," he said aloud, in reply to a question of Clement ; "hour after hour I lay awake, tossing and turning from side to side. Just now I feel sleepy, and not up to much talking ; but there's one thing I wish you would do for me, Mr. Clement."

Among the Bank staff Mr. Hazeldine's sons had always been spoken of as "Mr. Edward" and "Mr. Clement."

"I shall be glad to do anything for you that I can, Ephraim."

"I wish you would come and sit with me this afternoon when your busy time is over, and you have half-an-hour to spare. I shall, perhaps, feel a bit stronger by that time, and I have something particular that I am anxious to tell you—something very particular, which I dare not put off any longer for fear I may not be able to tell it at all."

"Since it is your wish, I will certainly come and see you this afternoon," answered Clement. "But you must not allow your spirits to get depressed. I sincerely trust that to-morrow morning will find you much better than you are to-day."

Ephraim smiled faintly.

"You and I know better than that, Mr. Clement," was all he said, as he shut his eyes with an air of weariness.

At four o'clock Clement called again, and was shown by Eliza Judd into her brother's room. Clem felt nothing more than a very mild curiosity as to the nature of the confession, or whatever it might prove to be, which Ephraim was about to impart to him. Sick men have often strange fancies, and attach a spurious importance to things which are of no real consequence, although at such times they seem to be.

Ephraim seemed stronger and brighter than he had been earlier in the day, but Clement's experienced eyes told him that it was merely a "flash in the pan"—a condition of things which might change for the worse at any moment.

"I must ask you to put anything you have to say to me in the fewest possible words," he said gently; "indeed, I would much rather you should defer it entirely till another time."

"Another time may never come," answered Ephraim, with a sigh. "No, you must hear me now while a little strength is left me. I will promise to be as brief as possible." He was breathing hard, and his sentences were uttered brokenly and with difficulty. After closing his eyes for a few moments as if to collect his thoughts, he said: "You were at the trial of Mr. Brancker, were you not, Mr. Clement? You listened to the evidence right through from beginning to end?"

"I don't think a single point of the evidence, as sworn to by the various witnesses, escaped me."

"You will not have forgotten that one of the facts which told strongly against Mr. B., and one which he professed himself totally unable to explain, was that some of the papers in his private drawer were smeared with blood, and that there was a similar smear on the floor close by?"

"I have not forgotten. The circumstance has always struck me as being a very peculiar one."

"I am the only person who could have explained it."

Clem gave vent to an exclamation of surprise, and with that the sick man went on to relate what is known to the reader already—how, led on by an insatiable curiosity, he opened the drawer with a duplicate key; how, while groping among the contents, his hand encountered the blade of the knife and was cut by it; how the blood spurted out among the papers, and how it kept dropping on the floor while he stood talking to Obed Sweet, afraid to stir.

"And why did you omit to tell all this at the trial?" demanded Clem sternly, as the other ceased speaking, breathless and exhausted.

"That you shall learn presently. There's more to tell yet," gasped Ephraim.

Clem administered a restorative. Had his patient's revelation had reference to any matter of lesser importance than the rehabilitation of John Brancker's good name in the eyes of the world, he would have positively

forbidden him to say another word ; but there was no knowing how he might be on the morrow, and it might prove of vital consequence that he should tell all he knew while there was still a possibility of his being able to do so.

"Both at the inquest and the trial I perjured myself," went on the sick man. I was asked whether I saw Mr. Brancker leave the Bank after he had parted from me, and had entered it with the avowed purpose of fetching his umbrella. My answer was that I did not see him leave the Bank. My saying so was a lie. I saw him leave it within four minutes of the time he entered it. He was there just long enough to enable him to find his umbrella, but not long enough to commit either murder or robbery, much less both, even supposing him to have been wishful of doing so.

"But what was your object in thus perjuring yourself?" demanded Clement, with an air of stupefaction. "What end had you to gain by not speaking the truth?"

"By telling the truth I should have brought about my own ruin. Mr. Avison would never have forgiven me had I confessed to opening John Brancker's drawer with a false key. He would have discharged me on the spot."

"I can understand the reasons for your reticence so far as that part of the case is concerned, but why did you swear that you had not seen Mr. Brancker leave the Bank?"

"Because I was a moral coward. When the coroner put the question to me I was flurried in my mind, and hardly knew what answer I was giving. My chief thought at the time was to divert suspicion from myself ; in saying what I did I had not the slightest notion that it would tell in any way against Mr. Brancker, but having once sworn that such was the truth, I was afraid to go back from it at the trial." Then, after a little space of silence, he added : "I want you to believe

this, Mr. Clement : if Mr. Brancker had been brought in guilty, I should have told all I knew, whatever might have been the cost to myself. And that is the solemn truth."

Clem was at a loss what reply to make to the strange statement of which he had been made the recipient. Both reproach and vituperation, even had he been willing to indulge in either, were out of the question with a man in his patient's condition. At length he said :

"I presume you have no objection to my telling Mr. Brancker what you have just told me, leaving him to act in the matter in whatever way may seem most advisable to him ?"

"That is exactly what I am desirous you should do ; and do not forget, please, to tell him how sincerely I regret the injury I have done him. That he will accord me his forgiveness is more than I dare hope."

Clement rose and took up his hat.

"I have not quite done yet," said the sick man. "What I am now about to tell you may seem of little or no consequence to you—in other words, you may take a different view of it from the one taken by me—but, in any case, it is only right that you should be told."

Clement sat down again, and waited in silence till Ephraim was ready to continue.

"You may remember," he resumed, "that at the Bank there is a spiral staircase which gives access to a couple of rooms under the roof, used chiefly as a storage place for old ledgers and documents of various kinds connected with the business ?"

Clement nodded.

"The staircase in question," continued Ephraim, "is exactly opposite the door of Mr. Hazeldine's room, and anyone going up it, or coming down it, can, if so minded, obtain a view of the interior of the office through the fanlight over the door—a fact which my

curiosity had led me to take advantage of on more occasions than one. On the night of Mr. Hazeldine's death, after John Brancker had gone and I had put my own work away, led by a vague curiosity, I stole half-way up the staircase and peered through the fanlight. Mr. Hazeldine's table, with Mr. Hazeldine seated at it, were clearly visible to me. Sir—Mr. Clement—while I was looking, I saw your father take out of a drawer in his table the very knife which was found near him on the floor next morning, and with which he was said to have been stabbed! He stared at it for a moment or two and tested its point with his thumb; then he unbuttoned his waistcoat, and with his left hand seemed to feel for the exact spot over his heart. Then he let the knife drop, and leaning forward over the table, he covered his face with his hands. With that, being not a little scared, I waited to see no more."

Clement sat with ashen face and horror-fraught eyes, waiting till the shock which Ephraim's words had caused him should in some measure have spent its force.

"You drew an inference of some kind from what you saw through the fanlight," he at length contrived to say "What was the inference?"

"That Mr. Hazeldine came by his death by his own hand," replied Ephraim in a whisper.

When Clement Hazeldine called on his patient next morning he found him delirious, and on the following day Ephraim died.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE BROTHERS.

EPHRAIM JUDD's deathbed confession naturally divided itself into two parts in Clement Hazeldine's afterthoughts, of which the first had reference exclu-

sively to John Brancker, while the second, which in Clem's eyes far exceeded the other in importance, concerned almost wholly his brother and himself. The horror with which he had listened to the latter portion of Ephraim's narrative toned itself down by degrees to a feeling of doubt, and from that, by an easy transition, to one of absolute incredulity. His father commit suicide! The bare idea of such a thing, to anyone who had known the man, was utterly preposterous. But supposing for a moment that the case had been as Ephraim implied, there still remained the robbery of the safe, which had been a concomitant incident of Mr. Hazeldine's death, to be accounted for. The truth was that the sick man's mind had wandered in the course of the previous night, and he had imagined circumstances which had never really happened. During illness the boundary line which divides the realm of fancy from that of fact is easily overpassed, and the weakened mind of the patient is unable to distinguish between the two. That such was the explanation in Ephraim's case it seemed impossible to doubt.

"Yet, if the latter part of his confession has no basis of fact, why assume that the first part had any more valid claim to credence? Clem asked himself this question more than once, but was unable to answer it to his satisfaction. He could not but admit that that part of the confession which related to John Brancker seemed to bear upon it the stamp of truth; the facts, if facts they were, as told by Ephraim, might very easily have happened; there was nothing intrinsically improbable about them, as there was about that other statement which had reference to Mr. Hazeldine.

Most of us have an easy habit of trying to persuade ourselves that things are as we wish them to be, and this was what Clement strove to do in the present instance, but not altogether successfully. The first portion of Ephraim's confession might be true, and probably was so, he told himself; but the second part was almost as

surely fictitious—a vision conjured up by the disordered brain of a sick man.

Clement was anxious to see his brother at the earliest possible moment, and unburthen his mind to him ; but it was not till the day after Ephraim's death that he found time to go over to Beecham. On arriving at the Brewery he walked straight into his brother's office feeling pretty sure that he should find him there. Nor was he mistaken. Edward, who was busy writing a letter as he entered, looked up and nodded, and with that Clem sat down to wait till he should be at liberty.

"Glad to see you," said Edward, as he applied the blotting-paper to his letter. "But, you look a bit worried. Anything the matter?"

"Ned," said the younger brother, leaning forward a little, and fixing his eyes intently on the other's face, "have you ever had any cause or reason to suspect that our father, instead of meeting his death at the hand of another, as everyone believed he did, committed suicide?"

On the instant every vestige of color fled from Edward Hazeldine's face ; he drew a deep breath that was almost a gasp, and set his teeth hard.

"Great heavens ! Edward, you do know, or suspect something of the sort !" cried Clement, staring at his brother's white face and drawn mouth, and feeling for the moment as if the foundations of his life were crumbling under him.

"Yes, I do know," said Edward, after a space of silence, speaking in cold, and, as it seemed, half-defiant tones. "I have known it all along. James Hazeldine was not murdered. He died by his own hand, in order to avert disgrace and ruin from himself and those belonging to him."

Then, before Clement could find a word to say, he rose, and crossing to a safe imbedded in the wall, he unlocked it, and from one of the drawers drew forth his father's letter,

"Read and believe," he said with stern brevity, as he pushed the letter across the table to Clem.

He had been so taken by surprise ; the question so abruptly put to him, had afforded him no clue as to how much or how little of the truth was known to his brother, that for the moment his presence of mind had deserted him, and before he had time to recover himself, Clem had challenged the truth.

"Well, he has got the truth now, and much good may it do him," said Edward, grimly, to himself. "Why should he not share it with me? The burthen has been a bitter one to bear. It has led me to do things such as at one time I would have believed no power on earth could have forced me into doing. Yes, let Clem take his share. He is a grown man ; why should we not halve the secret? I am not sorry that it has come about as it has. But how and from whom did he obtain the clue?"

Clem read the letter twice over, the first time quickly, and then slowly and deliberately, so that the pith and almost the exact words of each sentence burned themselves indelibly into his memory. Then he refolded it and passed it back to his brother, and then the two sat and looked at each other for a little while in sorrowful silence. Clement was the first to speak.

"You have known this all along, and yet you never told me," he said, with an accent of reproach.

"Where was the need? What good end would it have served? It was enough that one of us should have to carry such a secret about with him. I was the elder, and the burden devolved of right upon me. Besides, my father evidently relied upon my telling no one—not even you."

"It was my duty and my right to have shared it with you. In any case, I am glad—if, indeed, one can be glad about anything in connection with so terrible a secret—that the knowledge has come to me now instead of later on,"

"Could I have had my way, it would never have come to you. But before we discuss the matter further, tell me what led you to put that question to me which you flung at my head, as it were, with such startling suddenness."

Thereupon Clement proceeded to enlighten his brother as to all that had passed between himself and Ephraim Judd.

"It is a strange story," said Edward, when he had finished; "but I see no reason for doubting its credibility. All along I have been possessed by a sort of intuitive certainty that one day the truth would leap to light in a way the least expected, and now it has done so. After all, it will be a relief to have someone to share the secret with."

"You should have shared it with me from the first. But the question now is, what ought to be done next?"

"I scarcely follow you."

"I mean, as regards John Brancker. Ought he not to be told?"

"Told what?"

"What Ephraim Judd told me. It was the last wish of the dying man, as expressed by him to me, that such reparation should be made as was still possible."

"Just so! You would tell John Brancker all about the blood-smears, and also reveal to him the fact that Judd saw him quit the Bank five minutes after he had entered it, although at the trial he swore to the contrary. This you would tell, leaving Brancker to deal with the statement in whatever way might seem most advisable to him."

"That is precisely what I have thought of doing. So far everything seems perfectly clear. But, as regards the latter portion of the confession—supplemented as it is by our father's letter—that concerns John Brancker infinitely more than all the rest."

For the second time the eyes of the brothers met in a long, steady gaze,

"John Brancker was tried for a crime of which he was innocent, and was acquitted," said Edward, in a hard, cold voice. "To-day he is a free man—as free as you or I."

"But is that all? You know as well as I that it is not. Think of all he has suffered and gone through. Consider ——"

"I have considered—for I can foresee all you would urge. I have thought it over long ago from every possible point of view. It is for you to consider and to realize that there is an altogether different way of looking at the affair from the one you have chosen to adopt, one, too, which concerns you and me very nearly. With your good leave, I will proceed to make clear to you what I mean."

He got up, and crossing to a side table, poured out for himself a glass of water.

"It was within a couple of hours of hearing of my father's death," resumed Edward, "that I read the letter which you have seen to-day for the first time. The news had been broken to me by the very man we have been talking of—I mean by Judd—and I had just come back from the Bank after viewing my father's body. I will leave you to imagine the effect the letter had on me at such a time. Knowing what I did, no one could have been more surprised than I at the turn taken by the affair at the inquest, when one little piece of circumstantial evidence after another cropped up, all tending to bring home the crime to John Brancker, and it was a great shock to me when he was committed for trial. Had you been in my place, rather than let him go to prison, in all probability you would have made public the facts embodied in your father's letter."

"I certainly should have done so," said Clement, gravely.

"I preferred to hold on, taking care, meanwhile, to secure an eminent advocate for the defense. There were many weak links in the chain of evidence, and it

seemed to me that no jury would convict the prisoner without something stronger to go upon. The event proved that I was right in my belief. John Brancker was acquitted."

"Truly so; but can you even faintly realize the mental torture he must have suffered meanwhile? Can you ——"

"Edward held up his hand. "My dear fellow, I hope you do not for one moment imagine that I did not feel keenly for Brancker. My heart bled for him many and many a time. I seemed to myself to have added ten years to my age during those weeks that he lay in prison. I would willingly have given half of all I had in the world if by so doing I could have reversed the verdict of the Coroner's jury. But all that belongs to the past. What I want you to do now is to realize for yourself what would have been the effect on the fortunes of those he left behind him had I made known the contents of my father's letter. In the first place, your mother and sister would have been reduced to pauperism, or next door to it."

"How could that have come about?" demanded Clem, with a startled look.

"Because, had it become known that my father committed suicide deliberately and intentionally, and without any mitigating plea of mental derangement, his life policy of twelve thousand pounds would have been forfeited; and that, as you are aware, forms nearly the sole resource of your mother and sister."

"I had not thought of that," responded Clem. Neither had he. He had been so shocked at finding that the manner of his father's death had been known to Edward from the first, and that he had chosen to hush it up, that for the time being his mind had failed to grasp any of the consequences, near or remote, on which his brother had based his action in the affair.

"That would have been bad enough in all conscience," resumed Edward, "but worse, much worse,

would have followed. Had my father's case been one of simple suicide, that might have been got over, painful though it would have been ; but his letter has told you what there was in the background. One would have been only a misfortune, such as might happen in any family, but the other meant disgrace and social ruin to everyone connected with him. Could either you or I have ever held up our heads again in Ashdown? I am quite sure that I could not. I should have had to give up my position and all my prospects in life, and go away to some place where the name of Hazeldine had no taint of disgrace attached to it. Then, again, think what it would have meant to my mother and Fanny. They, too, would have had to seek some distant home, with poverty for their abiding companion. It would have gone far towards breaking my mother's heart, if it did not altogether do so, and who would knowingly marry the daughter of a man who ——? But, surely, not another word is needed."

"It is a terrible picture that you have drawn," said Clement, with an involuntary catching of his breath. In one brief half-hour he felt as if he had taken leave of his youth forever.

"Is it in any one respect an overcharged picture? You cannot conscientiously say that it is."

CHAPTER XXVII.

WRONG VERSUS RIGHT.

It was impossible for Clement Hazeldine to say that the picture painted by his brother, dark though its colors were, was in any respect overdrawn. In truth, he knew not what reply to make. He sat silently revolving in his mind the various features of the case as they had been presented by Edward, who was now beginning to turn over the letters and papers on his table in a way which seemed to imply, or Clement thought

so, that the point at issue had been thoroughly threshed out, and that any further discussion of it would be both distasteful and a waste of time. In point of fact, Edward was congratulating himself on having brought a very awkward bit of business to so satisfactory a conclusion. In all probability Clem would never allude to it again; it would be a secret between them—one that must never be breathed to a living soul, but equally one which they would never care to discuss with each other, nor to reopen in any way.

A movement on Clem's part drew Edward's attention to him. A sudden light had leapt to his eyes, a flush to his cheeks. What awkward question was he about to put now?

"Edward, it has just struck me for the first time, that if father really did put an end to his existence—and I am afraid we must accept it as the saddest of all sad facts that he did so—we had no right to claim the amount of his life policy from the Insurance Company."

It was now the turn of Edward Hazeldine to change color. Two vivid spots of red flamed out in his cheeks. "Yes," he exclaimed, in a harsh, strained voice, "I have been wondering whether that would be one of the points of objection which you would see fit to raise."

"It is one which failed to strike me till the present moment."

"What would you have done, I wonder, had you been in my place? That is a question which you will do well to think over at your leisure. Had a claim for the twelve thousand pounds not been sent in in due course, comment would have been aroused, which would inevitably have bred suspicion, and that, in its turn, would probably have led to inquiry; and what the latter, when once set afoot, would have led to, you can judge as well as I. Besides, what excuse could I have made to my mother and Fannie for not claiming the amount? I could have made no excuse; everything must have been told them. In addition, as I have already ex-

plained to you, without the twelve thousand pounds they would only have been a step or two removed from pauperism—in which case the fact of my not having claimed on the policy must have become known to everybody. Bah ! I might just as well have gone and read out my father's letter at the market cross."

"All that in no way alters the character of the transaction," said Clem, in a low voice.

"Oh, it was a fraud—a gross and palpable fraud—I fully admit that," exclaimed the elder brother, with a harsh laugh. "Even to myself I have never attempted to call it by any other name ; only, when you are weighing it in your thoughts, I should like you to put into the opposite scale the trifling facts I have just laid before you. To you they may seem to weigh less than they did with me ; but no man can gauge accurately the force of another's temptations. Enough, however, of this for the present." He rose with an air of weariness and looked at his watch.

It was a palpable hint, and Clem accepted it as such. He, too, rose. "John Brancker tells me," he said, "that he happened to meet you at the station on the day of his return from London, and that he explained to you the reason why he had been compelled to resign the situation you found for him."

Edward's face darkened a little.

"Yes, he gave me his version of the affair ; but I can't help saying that he seems to me to be excessively thin-skinned. I certainly should not have allowed myself to be put down in the way he seems to have done."

"A rather extreme sensitiveness to the opinion of others is as much a part of John as the color of his hair or the shape of his nose. Think what it must have been to a man of his temperament to go through all that he has gone through during the last six months ! You and I, who are of tougher fibre, can but partially realize it. And what is to become of him in the future ? The shadow of a crime with which he had nothing what-

ever to do still clings to him, and may do so for years to come. He is eating his heart out in dumb despair."

Edward Hazeldine took two or three turns from end to end of his office, his eyes bent on the ground and his hands buried deep in his pockets. The whole interview had been inexpressibly galling to him. He was one of those men to whom it is as wormwood and rue to be called upon to explain their reasons for any particular course of action, much more to apologize for it; yet he had felt under the necessity of doing both to-day, and now a query had been put to him which he would fain have answered, but could not. What, indeed, was to become of John Brancker? But before trying in any way to answer that awkward question, he felt that it behoved him to put himself right with Clem on one important point, much as it would cost him to do so.

"That I tacitly allowed John Brancker to be brought in guilty by a coroner's jury," he said, "that I allowed him to languish in prison for eight or nine weeks, and be brought to trial, when a dozen words from me would have made a free man of him—are facts which I have neither the power nor the wish to gainsay; but if you therefore imagine that in case the trial had gone against him, I would not then have spoken out and proclaimed our shame and disgrace to the world, you were never more utterly mistaken in your life. I was fully determined to keep my secret—our secret—till the last possible moment—I have already told you my motives for so doing—but not a moment longer. Had the second verdict proved a confirmation of the first, my father's letter would at once have been handed to the judge. I trust you believe that I am telling you the truth."

"I do believe it," said Clem, emphatically.

"You spoke just now of what John Brancker must have suffered during the weary weeks he lay in prison. I greatly doubt whether his sufferings were as poignant as mine. He was buoyed up and strengthened by the consciousness of innocence, while I ——— But why pur-

sue the topic? This only I will say in conclusion, that the last six months have been the most wretched of my life, and not for ten thousand pounds would I, of my own free will, go through such an experience again.

"I can fully credit that," replied Clem, earnestly, "and although the result of the trial must unquestionably have lifted a great weight off your mind, still—if I know anything of you, if you are the man I have always believed you to be—your burthen is but half removed. You are far from being clear of it yet."

Edward threw a quick, suspicious glance at his brother.

"Excuse me, Clem, if I fail to apprehend your meaning," he said, coldly.

"Is it not plain enough? How can you be the same man that you were before our father's death while you continue to keep to yourself the knowledge which would clear John Brancker from every iota of suspicion, and give him back the stainless character, and with it the happiness, of which you have deprived him? How can you look to regain that peace of mind which was your dearest possession, although you may not have known it at the time; how can you look your fellows in the face with untroubled eyes, knowing, as you do, that as the consequence of a deliberate act on your part, your mother and sister are living on the proceeds of a fraud? The fruits of wrong-doing never prove other than dust and ashes to those who pluck them."

They had both sat down again without thinking what they were about, and they now confronted each other across the office table. Clem's face was paler than ordinary, but never had he looked more like his brother than at that moment. The determination and quiet energy with which he had spoken had, for the time being, lent to his face some of the resolute lines and the firm, set expression which were characteristic of Edward.

"So that is your meaning, is it?" demanded the latter, with a sudden hoarseness in his voice.

"It is a meaning which has truth at the back of it, as you know full as well as I can tell you."

"Whether it has or has not, I certainly have no intention of acting on it, and that I tell you plainly. You have, so to speak, surprised a secret which it was my hope to keep from you as much as from the rest of the world; but your having done so constitutes no reason or excuse for any interference on your part between me and matters which concern myself alone."

"Matters which concern yourself alone, Edward! How can that be? The terrible wrong of which John Brancker has been the victim concerns me, as my father's son, at least as much as it does you, and ——"

But at this moment the door was opened, and one of the clerks thrust his head into the room.

"Lord Elstree to see you, sir," said the man.

As his lordship entered by one door, Clement made his way out by another.

The mental conflict which he went through in the course of the next few days was something altogether foreign to his experience. He recognized to the full the gravity of the reasons by which his brother had been influenced in acting as he had. In a small town like Ashdown social ostracism, and that of a most bitter and degrading kind, would be the inevitable portion of every member of the Hazeldine family after once the truth should have been avowed. As far as he was concerned, the practice he had got together by such laborious patience would be almost wholly ruined, and he would have to begin life afresh in some far away spot. And, then his mother and sister! To them the blow would be infinitely worse than either to himself or Edward.

On the other hand, the thought of John Brancker slowly wearing out his life under the shadow of a crime which a dozen words from him or his brother would

clear away for ever, was altogether intolerable to him. "Right is right, and wrong, wrong all the world over," he said to himself more than once. "There can be no wrong without suffering; but to knowingly let the innocent suffer for the guilty is worse than the commission of the wrong itself."

He arose one morning after a sleepless night. "This shall be put an end to, come what may," he said, grimly, to himself.

As soon as he had finished his morning rounds he went straight to Nairn Cottage. He found John busy in his garden, where much of his time was spent nowadays.

"Can you spare me five minutes here in the summer-house?" said Clem. "I have something particular to say to you."

"I can spare you the whole day, Mr. Clement, if it comes to that," answered John, with rather a dismal smile. There was an unusual gravity on the young doctor's face which he could not help noticing. He wondered what further bad news he was about to be told.

Clem had found himself unable to fix beforehand on any particular form of words in which to convey to John the startling news he had made up his mind to tell him. It was a terrible confession for a son to have to make, and his heart grew faint within him as he followed John into the summer-house; but he would not give himself time for further thought, or for any possible turning back from that which he sternly determined on going through with to the bitter end.

Without waiting to sit down, he took one of John's hands in both his, and grasping it very hard he said,

"A communication written by my father on the last day of his life, and addressed to my brother, has come into Edward's hands. In it my father announces his fixed determination to put an end to his existence. It seems that, unknown even to my mother, he had long

been suffering from a serious affection of the heart, and had been told by two eminent physicians that, at the most, his life was only worth a few months' purchase. That the knowledge of this fact preyed on his mind cannot be doubted, nor that, in conjunction with certain other circumstances, it led him to take the desperate resolve which resulted in its fatal consummation a few hours after the letter in question was written. Do not ask me to enter into any details—at least, not now. It will be enough if I assure you that both Edward and I are fully agreed that my father's tragic end was due to his own rash act, and that no shadow of blame or suspicion attaches to any other person."

John stood with blanched face and incredulous eyes like one whom some sudden shock has bereft of half his senses. Clem stood with down-dropped eyes, breathing hard and biting his under lip. It was all he could do to crush down the emotion that was battling within him.

"But about the robbery? About the missing money?" queried John at length, in a voice that was hardly more than a whisper.

"Do not ask me—do not ask me!" cried Clem, in tones full of anguish. Dropping John's hand, he turned abruptly away, and seating himself on the bench which ran round three sides of the summer-house, he rested his elbows on the little table and covered his face with his hands. Convulsive sobs shook his frame from head to foot. John, his eyes streaming with tears, stepped quietly up to him, and laid a hand gently on his shoulder.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VICTORY.

"THE pity of it—oh, the pity of it!" were John Brancker's first words as soon as he was able in some measure to control his feelings. "What you have told me has both shocked and grieved me as I was never shocked or grieved before. But do not say a word more about it, Mr. Clement, either now or at any future time. I would infinitely rather that you should not, and you may rest assured that I shall never ask you a single question."

"You can judge for yourself, Mr. Brancker, what my reasons were for telling you this," said Clem, whose brief burst of emotion had left him pale and calm. "Your career in life has been to a great extent compromised. A certain amount of suspicion in connection with what the world, in its ignorance of the facts of the case, naturally regards as a great crime, still clings to you, and to all seeming will continue to do so for years to come, if not as long as you live. It is now in your power to dispel that suspicion once and forever, and to clear away the dark cloud which has lowered over you for so many months. To do this needs only that you should make known to the world the facts which I have laid before you to-day."

"And do you for one moment believe, my dear Mr. Clement, that I should even dream of doing anything of the kind?" demanded John, with a sort of sad surprise. "I loved and honored your father. He was my friend at a time when I had no other friend in the world. He took me by the hand; he found a situation for me; I owe everything to him. You know that I am innocent; your brother knows it; that is enough. Perhaps you won't mind my telling my sister—I have no secrets from her—but not another creature shall

hear it from me. Let the world continue to suspect me if it thinks well to do so. I can afford to appraise its doubts and suspicions at their proper value, which is no value at all. Henceforth I shall despise them, and I think, Mr. Clement, a man can always afford to live down a thing that he holds in contempt."

Clem drew a deep breath. The relief which John's words had given him no one but himself could estimate. Still, in common fairness to this generous-souled man, he felt bound to protest against a decision so adverse to his interests.

"It seems to me, Mr. Brancker," he said, "that you owe it as a sacred duty to those who are nearest and dearest to you to set yourself right in the eyes of the world, now that the means of doing so are offered you, and to resume that place in society which you have forfeited through no fault of your own."

"I owe a still more sacred duty to my dear lost friend, as those who are nearest and dearest to me would be the first to remind me if there were any danger of my forgetting it. No, Mr. Clement, I have made up my mind, and in this matter, if in no other, I am determined to have my way and do that which seems right in my own eyes."

Clement saw that it would be useless to press the point further. Indeed, had he wished to do so, he knew of no terms in which he could have urged his plea. How, in fact, could he have further urged the doing of a thing, the outcome of which would have been nothing less than disgrace and misery to him and his?

"I have something still to tell you," said Clem, presently. "You are, of course, aware that Ephraim Judd is dead?"

"Why, of course. It was yourself that brought the news to the Cottage, when I told you how much I regretted not having called upon him, but that I had no notion he was so dangerously ill."

"True! I have had much to think of lately, and had

forgotten. Well, Ephraim made a very strange statement, which he charged me to repeat to you after he was gone. He had done you a great wrong, and the only reparation he could make was by confessing it."

With that Clem went on to detail to John that part of the dead man's confession which concerned him ; but said no word about the latter portion—that which dealt with what Ephraim had witnessed through the fanlight.

"Poor fellow !—poor fellow !" exclaimed John, when the other had come to an end. "The temptation was a great one, and he was unable to resist it. He was tried beyond his strength, as it may be the lot of any of us to be. It was very wrong of him, not merely to keep back what he knew, but to swear to an untruth ; but he is gone where his faults and his virtues will be weighed in the balances which cannot err, and Heaven forbid that I should attempt to blacken his memory by a single word. So, if you please, Mr. Clement, you and I will keep the poor fellow's confession to ourselves. It could do no possible good at this late date to make it public."

Later in the day Clement sought his brother.

"I have told John Brancker everything, or next to everything," he began abruptly. "I could no longer reconcile it to my conscience to keep him in ignorance of what was of such vital concern to him."

"I felt nearly sure that you would be guilty of some such fool's trick," was Edward's stern rejoinder. Then he added, with a sneer, "I hope you will be able to reconcile the article you call your conscience to the disgrace and ruin which will inevitably result from your mad action. The thought of your mother and sister might have restrained you, if nothing else had power to do so."

"Neither disgrace nor ruin will result from what I have done," answered Clem, quietly. "John Brancker will make no use of what I have told him. Except to

his sister, he will breathe no word of it to a living creature."

Edward looked at him with eyes that expressed nothing but blank amazement.

"If it be as you say," he presently remarked, "then is John Brancker one of the noblest-hearted of men."

"It is as I say. I have his word for it."

"Ah!" said Edward, with an indrawing of his breath. "You can hardly realize what a weight you have lifted off my mind. It meant more to me than even you are aware of, that both the manner and the cause of our father's death should never be divulged. You said just now that you had told John Brancker 'next to everything.' May I ask what you meant by that particular phrase?"

"I told him nothing which would lead him to infer that the facts of the case had become known either to you or me until quite lately. Then, again, I said nothing to him of what Ephraim Judd saw through the fanlight."

Edward nodded approvingly.

"They were wise omissions on your part." Then, as if he were thinking aloud, he exclaimed, "A noble-hearted fellow!"

"What a pity it is that he can get nothing to do, observed Clem. "I suppose that he and his sister and his niece are living on his savings; but that is a sort of thing which can hardly go on for ever."

"An idea has just come to me," replied Edward, "which may or may not lead to something that will benefit him; but it would be premature to enter into any particulars till after I have had the chance of a talk with Lord Elstree."

"One thing more remains to be done," said Clem, presently.

"Eh? And what may that be, pray?"

"The refunding of the twelve thousand pounds insurance money,"

"Good gracious, Clem! Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"I trust not. I am simply proposing to right a great wrong. I can quite understand that at the time you accepted the money you saw no other course open to you without exciting suspicions which you would have had no means of allaying except by making public a secret which it seemed to you must be concealed at every risk. It seems to me, however, that there is a way of getting out of the difficulty, and that without endangering your—or, as I may now call it, our—secret in any way."

"I have no objection to being enlightened," remarked Edward, dryly. "But pray don't forget that this is a matter in which your mother's and sister's interests are more deeply concerned than those of anyone else."

"That is a point I have by no means overlooked. In the first place, there need be no difficulty about refunding the money. Let it be divided into two or three sums, to be forwarded at intervals from different places. Of course, the sender would remain strictly anonymous. Then, as regards my mother and Fanny. They need never be made aware of the return of the money. The income which now accrues to them from its investment must continue to be paid with the same regularity as heretofore, the only difference being that you and I between us must make up the amount."

Never had Edward Hazeldine felt so taken aback as at that moment. Not the least odd feature of the affair was the quiet, matter-of-fact tone in which Clement put forward his proposition; had he been arguing some disputed point of anatomy with a fellow-student he could not have been cooler or more self-collected: Mentally and morally the elder brother felt as if a cold-water "douche" had been suddenly sprung upon him. It was not till the silence had lasted fully a couple of minutes that he seemed able to find anything to say.

"You are, of course, in a position to allow your

mother and sister two hundred and forty pounds a year out of your income, which is about what your share would come to," he said at length, with a hardly veiled sneer.

Clem flushed a little.

"As circumstances are with me now, it would leave me with a very narrow margin to live upon," he replied; "but even were it still smaller, I would gladly make the sacrifice."

"What about your marriage? I hope you don't forget that the burthen you propose saddling yourself with is not merely a question of a year or two, but of the lifetime of your mother, who, we have every reason to hope and believe, may live for many years to come."

"As for my marriage, it would have to be put off till more prosperous times," replied Clem, not without a stifled sigh.

"Very well; but there is another feature which you may not, perhaps, have considered. Supposing the twelve thousand pounds to have been refunded in accordance with your wish, in the case of my mother's death, how would you propose to make up Fanny's one-third share of it to which she is entitled by my father's will? She may be married before that time, in which case the four thousand pounds she supposes herself to be ultimately entitled to will naturally be considered, both by her and her husband, as a certainty which nothing can deprive them of."

"That is a point which certainly failed to strike me," answered Clem. "But let me answer your question by asking another. Supposing the money not to have been refunded, in case of my mother's death would you be willing to touch your share of an amount to which morally you have no more right than has any of your clerks who are at work in the next room?"

Edward bit his lips.

"No," he said emphatically, after a pause ; "in such a case as you speak of, not one shilling of the money would be touched by me."

"I could have vouched for your answer beforehand," said Clem, with a smile of triumph. "Now that you have confessed thus much, it is impossible for you to stop there. You are as convinced as I am, my dear Ned, that the twelve thousand pounds must be refunded. As honorable men no other course is open to us." He looked at his watch, and then rose and pushed back his chair. "I find I have not another minute to spare," he said, as he gripped his brother's hand. "But now that we are agreed as to the main point at issue, the settlement of the details can be left till I see you next."

It was on Edward's lips to say, "I have agreed to nothing," but some feeling restrained him.

Clem's words, "As honorable men no other course is open to us," rang in Edward's ears long after he was left alone. Had he not always prided himself on being an honorable man, one whose simple word had been as binding on him as if it had been safe-guarded by all sorts of legal pains and penalties, till the terrible complication which originated with his father's death had first planted his feet on that slippery path which tends downward, ever downward, by such fatally easy gradations, from which it is nigh impossible to retrace one's steps? Was it too late for him to retrace his steps? He decided that it was not. A helping hand—nay, two helping hands, those of John Bracker and his brother—had been stretched out to him in a way the least expected, and he had but to grasp them to be dragged back out of the quicksands in which he had been floundering of late, and set again on the firm ground where that fatal October night had found him. How deeply thankful he should be to find himself there again, no one but himself could more than faintly imagine.

In the course of next day he wrote and dispatched the following brief note to his brother :

" DEAR CLEM,

" It shall be as you wish.

" Yours,

" E. H."

CHAPTER XXIX.

MIXED THREADS.

ALTHOUGH Edward Hazeldine had made up his mind to refund the twelve thousand pounds, it was impossible for him to do so at once. The amount had been invested by him in his mother's name in a certain undertaking of which Lord Elstree was one of the managing directors, subject, however, to six months' notice of withdrawal. Consequently, even if he were to give notice immediately, half a year must elapse before he should be in a position to carry out the plan as agreed upon with his brother. One specially awkward feature of the affair was that he was utterly at a loss what excuse to allege to Lord Elstree for the withdrawal of the money, which his Lordship would doubtless look upon as a somewhat extraordinary proceeding. It seemed to him that, in any case, he would be under the necessity of telling a lie in the matter, which was a thing he hated doing ; but, even so, the lie must be a feasible one, and, for the life of him, he could not think of one that would " hold water." He smiled bitterly to himself to think that matters had come to such a pass with him that he should have to keep on puzzling his brain for hours over the invention of a plausible falsehood. Had anyone told him six months before that such would be the case, he would unhesitatingly have denounced the assertion in much stronger language than he ordinarily made use of.

As it fell out, however, he was saved from a hateful

necessity by no less a person than Lord Elstree himself. At their next interview, which befell a few days later, his Lordship said :

"By the way, Hazeldine, I think it just as well to inform you, in view of the fact that you have a very considerable sum invested in the affair, that I am by no means satisfied with the present policy and management—mismanagement would be the proper term for it—of it. My advice is no longer listened to by the Board ; my representations are pooh-poohed behind my back ; and, in point of fact, I have good reason for believing that the Corporation is slowly but surely drifting into difficulties. In any case, I mean to sever my connection with the concern as soon as possible, and I should advise you to do the same. All this, of course, is strictly *entre nous*."

"I am extremely grateful to your Lordship for your kindness in giving me the hint"—and so, indeed, he felt himself to be. "I will send in a notice of withdrawal by this evening's post."

After that, his Lordship's talk drifted away to an entirely different topic, but one which, as it happened, had for Edward an interest only secondary to that of the previous one, and the first result of it was a brief note, written and dispatched a couple of hours later.

"DEAR CLEM,

"If possible, come and see me in the course of to-morrow.

Yours,

"E. H."

The following afternoon found Clement at the Brewery.

Edward's first words were : "As regards the twelve thousand pounds, I have already sent in the notice of withdrawal, but, as you are aware, unless the fact has escaped your memory, I shall not receive a draft for the amount till six months from the date of the notice."

"There is no help for that, of course. After all, half

a year is not a long time to wait, and now that the first and most important step has been taken, the rest will follow easily and in due course."

"And now I've another item of news that will please you," said Edward. "The position of chief book-keeper at the Hollowdale Smelting Works happens to be vacant. Lord Elstree is Chairman of the Company, and the appointment rests with him. At my intercession he has agreed to offer the post in question to John Brancker, whom he considers to have been very shamefully treated by Mr. Avison. The salary will be a hundred and eighty pounds a year to start with, and as the works are only a dozen miles away, John will be able to go backward and forward morning and evening by train—that is to say, provided he thinks the post worthy of his acceptance."

"I feel nearly sure that I can answer for John's acceptance of the offer," said Clem, with sparkling eyes. "And then to think what a weight it will lift off both your shoulders and mine!"

John Brancker had replied to Mr. Hodgson's somewhat peremptorily-worded note on the day following that of his return from London. Miss Rivers, he told him, absolutely declined to break off her engagement with Mr. Hazeldine, or even to consider the question at all, unless the command to do so emanated from some one who was legally entitled to control her actions until she should come of age. In short, Mr. Hodgson must lift the veil which concealed her parentage, and prove to her that there was someone still living who had a right to her obedience, or to so much of it as could be looked for by anyone who for seventeen years had neglected to put forward the slightest claim thereto. It was a very outspoken letter, and John meant it for such. He was heart and soul with the young people, and totally opposed to their having their fate settled by

someone as to whose identity they knew no more than they did of that of the proverbial man in the moon.

But day passed after day without bringing any answer to John's letter. Hermia shrugged her pretty shoulders, and said it was quite evident that the information she had asked for was more than Mr. Hodgson was prepared, or empowered, to furnish her with. Meanwhile she was quite content to let matters go on as they were at present.

John had not failed to tell his sister all that had passed at the momentous interview between himself and Clement, and how he had resolved to keep the true story of Mr. Hazeldine's death as a sacred secret to be divulged to no one save her to whom he now told it. It was a course which received the full approval of Aunt Charlotte. However much her brother might have suffered in the past, and however dark the prospect ahead might still be, to have revealed the dead man's secret, which he had been at such terrible pains to hide from everyone save his two sons, would have seemed to these worthy souls almost as much an act of profanation as if they had rifled his grave.

It was left to Clement to disclose to Hermia as much, or as little, relating to the affair as he might deem advisable. With what he told her, or what, in the exercise of a wise reticence, he omitted to tell her, we have nothing here to do.

And now came the offer from Lord Elstree. "At last—at last the sun is breaking through the clouds," exclaimed Aunt Charlotte, with tears of joy in her eyes when the news was told her. "What will the Ash-down people think now, dear, when they find that his Lordship has taken you by the hand?" she added. "There will be no more looking askance at you in future, I'll warrant. Not one of them but will discover that he, or she, was quite convinced from the first that you were an innocent man who had been deeply wronged."

To Frank Derison life seemed a somewhat tame affair after he had broken off his engagement to Miss Rivers and had given his word to Mr. Avison that the billiard table of the "Crown and Cushion" should see him no more. Now that he had lost Hermia, he felt that he loved her far more than he had ever loved her before. He could not get her image out of his thoughts; her face haunted his dreams by night and came between him and his work by day. He had not even the satisfaction of knowing that he had made her unhappy. He might and did regret her, but he had no proof that she regretted him. Evidently she had told him no more than the truth, although he could not credit it at the time, when she said in her letter that she should hail the rupture of their engagement as a relief. The news of her engagement to Clement Hazeldine had not failed to reach his ears—it had been no hole-and-corner affair; more than once, in the pleasant spring evenings, he saw them walking out together, and he ground his teeth and raged inwardly as he watched them.

Frank, however, was not without his compensations, although they were of a kind which he was not the one to value as many in his place would have done. He was made aware through his mother, who had her information from the elder Mr. Avison, that he was rising slowly but surely in his employer's estimation. It was Mrs. Derison's opinion, and doubtless she had good reasons for giving expression to it, that if only he were careful to keep on as he had begun, there was nothing to hinder him from attaining in the course of a few years to a partnership in the business. Ephraim Judd's death had been the means of giving him another step upward and another increase of salary. Already he stood next to Mr. Howes, who had succeeded Mr. Hazeldine as managing clerk.

Yet Frank no more liked his work at the Bank now than he had liked it when a youth of sixteen, although that was a fact which he confided to no one's ear but

his mother's. He hated banking and everything connected with it, save and except the drawing of his salary at the close of each month. He was not without a certain amount of surface cleverness, together with a degree of tact which had in it an element of cunning ; and by the aid of these, in combination with a frankly audacious manner and a handsome presence, he contrived to throw dust in the eyes of most people, and to pass for a much cleverer fellow than he was. He was not brought much into personal contact with Mr. Avison, who seemed, indeed, for reasons best known to himself, to keep aloof from him of set purpose ; and as to how far his shallow pretensions to business ability were accurately gauged by Mr. Howes, was best known by Mr. Howes himself. In any case, the new managing clerk treated Frank with much consideration, not unmixed with a finely shaded measure of deference ; but it may have been that the astute old official was not without his suspicions that Master Frank might one day sit in the curule chair of authority at the Bank.

Although Mrs. Derison had lived in Ashdown for several years she had but few acquaintances and no intimates, consequently the virtue of hospitality was one which she was rarely called upon to exercise. Now and then one or two lady visitors of her own age would call and would be invited to stay for tea, but that was all ; while it was only on rare occasions that she visited anywhere herself. Frank had, therefore, every reason for feeling surprised when his mother said to him one evening :

"I want you to give up your bedroom for a few weeks, and change into the back room. We are about to have a visitor."

"Good gracious ! mother. It must be somebody important, or you would not want me to budge."

"It is your half-cousin, Mildred Dixon. I have invited her to stay for a month, and she has agreed to do so."

"Wonders will never cease," said the mystified Frank.

"You have not forgotten her I hope."

"Not a bit of it, though it must be seven or eight years since I saw her last. But what is your object in inviting her, if I may make so bold as to ask?"

"My object is that you should make love to her, propose to her, and by-and-bye make her your wife."

Frank stared aghast at his mother. "Have you taken leave of your senses, *madre mia*!" he asked, after a pause.

"I have no reason to think so, my son."

"I marry Mildred Dixon! The notion is too utterly proposterous. In the first place she's six years older than I am. Then she's awfully freckled, and wears spectacles, and has a squat figure. I'd as soon marry my grandmother, if the old lady were alive."

"What have either her looks or her age to do with the affair? Miss Dixon is both accomplished and amiable, and has, in addition, a fortune of twenty thousand pounds."

Frank bit his nails for a few moments as if deep in thought; then looking up, he said:

"Mother, this thing is not a suggestion of your own. I can pretty well guess the quarter from whence it emanates."

"And what then? Is not your welfare at the bottom of the scheme? People at the head of a prosperous concern don't usually choose a virtual beggar for their partner; but no one could call a man with twenty thousand pounds at his back by any such title!"

So that was how the wind lay! Frank felt that the golden shackles were being riveted upon him one by one. He had thrown over—like the mean cur he knew himself to be—the only girl he could ever really love, and now he was called on to sell his freedom.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE DOWNWARD PATH. A PROPOSAL.

FRANK DERISON looked forward to the arrival of his cousin with much disfavor. Under any circumstances it would have seemed to him bad enough that his future should be cut-and-dried for him as if he were still a child in leading-strings, and that a bride should be thrust on him without as much as a "by your leave," but, as the case stood, it was rendered still more obnoxious by the fact that Fate had chosen for him a wife for whom he could never feel even that tepid amount of affection which seems to be found an amply sufficient capital in the majority of matrimonial ventures. As a cousin Miss Dixon might be everything one could wish, but as a wife he felt that before long he should positively hate her. Frank's affections, fleeting and shallow as they were, could only be captured by youth and good looks, and unfortunately Miss Dixon could boast of neither. When he compared her in his thoughts with sweet Hermia Rivers, and called to mind all that he had flung away, his heart grew very bitter within him, and he often felt that he would gladly cast behind him all his chances of worldly advancement if, by so doing, he could bring back those pleasant evenings of six months ago when he was a welcome visitant at Nairn Cottage, and when Hermia ever greeted his coming with a smile, the like of which for him the world did not hold. Oh, fool—fool that he had been!

But Frank was a man of many moods, and there were times when the cold whispers of worldly prudence fell soothingly on his ear. Twenty thousand pounds! It was a large sum, but, large as it was, it was only intended by those who had taken his future into their charge as the stepping-stone to something larger still. He was as fully assured as if his mother had told him in

so many words, that his marriage with Miss Dixon was looked upon as a necessary condition, and that, unless he acceded to it, he need look for no further advancement at the Bank. The price demanded was a heavy one, or so it seemed to him. He knew fully a dozen girls, any one of whom (his lingering love for Hermia notwithstanding) he would willingly have married, even with half of twenty thousand pounds for a dowry. But Mildred Dixon, with her six years' seniority, her freckles, her spectacles, and her squat figure! Poor Frank could not help feeling that fate was treating him very hardly indeed.

But there came a reprieve for him almost at the last moment. A couple of days before Miss Dixon was due to arrive, Mrs. Derison received a note from her in which she stated that, owing to her mother having been suddenly attacked with illness, her visit would have to be deferred. Frank's spirits rose as if by magic.

"Her visit is only put off for a little while," said Mrs. Derison coldly, as she refolded the note after reading it aloud. "Nothing is altered."

But a respite is a respite all the world over, and Frank's was one of those mercurial natures which, while they are easily depressed, are just as easily elated, and have no inclination to meet trouble half way. He wished old Mrs. Dixon no harm; still, if her illness should prove to be a lingering one, any profession of sorrow on his part would be the merest hypocrisy.

"You never seem to take into account the fact that Mildred might not care to accept my humble and unworthy self as a partner for life," he said, with a quizzical smile, to his mother.

"Mildred is a sensible young woman, and knows what is expected of her," was the only reply vouchsafed him.

When Mr. Avison gave Frank plainly to understand that he must turn over a fresh leaf, and cease frequenting the billiard-room of the "Crown and Cush-

ion," and such-like places, he at the same time intimated to him that for some time past his movements after office hours had been watched by a person who had been employed for that purpose, and it was the fear lest this secret spy might still be similarly engaged that kept his footsteps so straight from that time forward. He had insensibly got into the habit of spending so many of his spare hours in the billiard-room that he was at a loss how to get through his evenings with satisfaction to himself now that he no longer dared be seen there. Now that his fortunes at the Bank were rising so rapidly, he began to have plenty of invitations to the houses of well-to-do people, where he met a sufficiency of pleasant society of both sexes, but where everything was conducted with an amount of propriety and decorum which to Frank became at times absolutely depressing. He hated negus and sandwiches, and having to invent polite nothings for the benefit of a pack of scandal-loving dowagers. He hated having to dance attendance on a crowd of girls, for not one of whom he cared a jot. He was a man who loved men's society, but men out of their evening clothes. He liked the freedom and abandon of the smoking-room and the tavern parlor. His pipe was dear to him, and already he had a taste for cold grog, which in the course of time might develop into a confirmed habit. Thus it will be readily understood that to Frank Derison, life of late had seemed a somewhat tame affair.

It was just about this time that he made the acquaintance of a young fellow of his own age of the name of Crofts, who was in business with his father as a solicitor at Dulminster. Mr. Crofts was engaged to an Ashdown young lady, and used to go over two or three times a week to see her, and enjoy himself generally at this party, or the other dance.

"Beastly poky little hole, Ashdown," said Mr. Crofts one evening, as he and Frank were indulging in a cigarette in the balcony of a house where they had hap-

pened to meet. "Dulminster is bad enough in all conscience, but this place is a dozen times worse."

"What can a fellow do when hard necessity ties one to it?"

"What, indeed! You haven't even a club in the place, I presume?"

"Not the ghost of one."

"Why don't you join ours at Dulminster? Very small and select, and all that. Say the word, and I'll propose you at the next meeting."

"Awfully good of you, but this is the first word I've heard about it."

"Why not run over by the five-thirty train on Friday next, and pick a bit of dinner with me? We'll go on to the club afterwards, where I'll introduce you to half a score 'Bons Frères'—that's what we call ourselves—jolly good fellows one and all!"

The invitation so frankly given was as frankly accepted. Frank was introduced to the Club in due course, and was presently proposed and elected.

Mr. Crofts had spoken no more than the truth when he said that the club was small and select. In point of fact it was neither more nor less than a little coterie of gamblers. There were the usual reading, smoking, and billiard-rooms, but the card-room was the real focus of attraction. Frank, who like his father was a born gambler, entered heartily into the thing, and before long got into the way of spending three or four evenings a week at the "Bons Frères." The last train between Dulminster and Ashdown left the former place a quarter of an hour before midnight, but when Frank chanced to miss it—which he usually did at least once a week—there was always a bed for him at his friend's, while the eight o'clock morning train landed him at Ashdown in ample time for business.

It was scarcely to be expected that Frank should content himself with a quiet pool at billiards, while such exciting games as baccarat and unlimited loo were in

progress in the next room. Accordingly his cue was left to languish on the wall, and he turned his attention wholly to that other board of green cloth which for him was by far the more seductive of the two. Occasionally he rose from the table a winner, but fortune frowned on him far oftener than she smiled. The fact was that both by nature and disposition Frank was too rash and impulsive to be evenly matched as against certain cool and cautious habitués of the club—old hands who look upon the card-table as a regular source of income, and never throw away a chance. But although he lost and lost again, his ardor for play in nowise abated; rather, indeed, did it seem to grow the fiercer with the gradual lightening of his pockets.

Mrs. Derison had always insisted on Frank's putting aside a certain portion of his salary, month by month, in the Ashdown Savings' Bank, and the amount thus laid by had by this time accumulated to something like a hundred and fifty pounds. On this fund Frank now began to draw, of course without his mother's knowledge, in order to enable him to meet his losses at cards. Five or six weeks sufficed to make a big hole in his small capital, but still, with the gambler's desperate recklessness, he kept on his course, convinced from day to day that "luck" must change in his favor, and fatuously failing to recognize the fact that he was being quietly but effectually fleeced, and that without any suspicion of cheating on their part, by men far cleverer than himself.

Now that Edward Hazeldine, urged thereto by his brother, had resolved, as far as in him lay, to annul the act of wrongdoing to which he had unwillingly lent himself; now that an intolerable burden had been lifted off his life and his self-respect had in some measure come back to him, he resolved, at the earliest opportunity, to carry out his long-cherished intention of proposing to Miss Winterton. By this time the

family at Seaham Lodge were back from Torquay, but Edward did not feel that he should be justified in going over there specially and asking for an interview with Miss Winterton. He must wait till he was invited by his Lordship, and then make his opportunity as best he could. As it fell out he had not long to wait. The Earl wanted to see him on business matters, but being laid up with gout, could not leave home, consequently Edward must go to the Lodge. It was further intimated to him that her Ladyship would be pleased for him to stay and dine.

Having finished his business with the Earl in good time, Edward went in search of Miss Winterton. There was a chance of securing a quarter of an hour alone with her before dinner, but not much likelihood of being able to do so later on. A servant directed him, and he found her in the terrace garden. They had not met for nearly four months.

Miss Winterton gave him her hand with a smile, but seemed so entirely unembarrassed that he could not flatter himself with the idea that she had the least suspicion as to the nature of the errand which had caused him to seek her out. That, however, in nowise served to turn him from his purpose ; and after a little talk on ordinary topics which helped, as it were, to break the ice between them, he plunged at once into the subject which just then was paramount with him. He began his declaration in manly if somewhat commonplace terms, but had not proceeded far before the stream of his eloquence was arrested by Miss Winterton placing one of her hands on his sleeve with a gesture which he could not mistake.

"Before you say a word more, Mr. Hazeldine, permit me to ask you one question," she said, speaking with perfect quietude and without a trace of irritation or annoyance. "Are you, or are you not, aware that your father was not murdered, as everyone was led to believe, but that, in point of fact, he put an end to his own

existence? Because if you are aware of it, do you think, taking all the circumstances of the case into consideration, that, as an honorable man, you are justified in asking me to become your wife?"

Had the ground opened at Edward Hazeldine's feet he could not have been more startled and astounded. He knew not what to say, where to look, what to do. Had his carefully-guarded secret, which he had flattered himself was known but to four people, or, at the outside, to five, become public property? If not, how had Miss Winterton become possessed of it? But these were vain questions, and what he had now to consider was the answer it behoved him to give to Miss Winterton. A moment later he had made up his mind. There should be no more double-dealing, or fencing with the truth on his part; he had suffered enough from that sort of thing already.

"Yes, I am aware of it," he said, with the desperate calmness of a man who finds himself in a position from which he sees no way of escape. "I have known it from the first. But I am a moral coward, Miss Winterton, and the consequences of telling the world what I knew would have been so grievous to me and mine that I had not the courage to avow the truth. You are right. I had no justification in speaking to you as I did. I can only crave your forgiveness for my offence, and assure you that you need have no fear of a repetition of it.

He raised his hat, made a more profound bow than ever he had made in his life, and then turning on his heel, he strode slowly back towards the house.

On previous occasions when he had dined at the Lodge it had nearly always been his lot to take down Miss Winterton, but to-day it was a relief to him to find himself relegated to Mrs. Wiggins, the wife of the family lawyer, to whom he paid as much attention during the progress of the meal as the somewhat confused state of his faculties would allow of his doing.

CHAPTER XXXI.

CLEMENT'S QUEST.

It was only natural that Hermia's thoughts, since "Uncle John" had revealed to her the story of her adoption, should revert times without number to the mystery which enshrouded her birth and early years, challenging it first from one point of view and then from another, but only to give it up at last baffled and disheartened, and still, to all seeming, no nearer than before to finding the hidden key. More and more the possibility that she might still have a mother living became a dominant factor in her thoughts. Might there not have been a score of different reasons, she asked herself, why this mother should have been compelled to put her child out among strangers? And might not the same or other reasons still have force enough to keep her from acknowledging her daughter, or even allowing the fact of her own existence to become known? The more Hermia allowed her mind to dwell on the image thus conjured up the more clearly did it—unconsciously to the girl herself—assume by degrees an objective existence in her thoughts, till at length it needed but little to induce her to persuade herself that this mysterious parent was a being as real and tangible as any of those she saw around her. It was strange, she sometimes thought, that never had she yearned so much for a mother's love as now, when that other love, so sweet and yet so widely different, had taken her heart captive and held it beyond all power of ransom.

Something of this Hermia confided to Clement in their many walks and talks together—something, but not all, for in a maiden's heart there are sacred chambers, the threshold of which, not even to her lover, is it given to cross. But much of what she did not tell Clement, love's fine intuition enabled him to divine.

For one thing, he could see that Hermia, without attaching paramount importance to the interdiction which had been laid upon her, could not help secretly chafing under it ; as also that, in her own despite, the longing to unmask the secret of her birth was becoming more importunate day by day. Thus it fell out that, after a little while, Clement began to formulate a certain scheme in his mind, and when once he saw his way clear, proceeded with characteristic energy to arrange the preliminary steps for carrying it out.

On a certain spring evening, when our two young people were alone together, Clem said abruptly, and *apropos* to nothing which had gone before, "I don't think, dearest, that if you were to try till to-morrow you could guess what I am going to do next week."

"In that case it would be foolish of me to try. But, of course, you will experience a little sense of injury if, after this preliminary flourish on your part, I omit to ask you what it is that you purpose doing."

"On Tuesday next I shall leave home for a fortnight's holiday."

"Oh !" a little dubiously. "I was not aware that you are out of health—you don't look it—and if you are fagged or worried with overwork, you have kept your secret very carefully."

Clem tugged at his moustache and broke into a laugh.

"I was never better in my life than at this moment ; and as for overwork, if I had fifty more patients on my hands than I have, you would not hear a murmur of complaint."

"But what about such patients as you have on your hands ? Are you going to give them a chance of recovering while you are away ?"

"Not likely ; that would never do. A friend of mine, Vallance by name, who happens just now to be on the lookout for a practice of his own, has offered to come and physic them during my absence."

"Well, I hope you will have fine weather and enjoy yourself, although the majority of people, who, of course, don't know better, generally defer their holidays till July or August."

"I am quite aware that you are dying to ask me my reasons for going away at this time of year, only your pride won't let you do so."

"The self-conceit of some people is truly amazing. I curious to know your reasons! What next, pray?"

"In any case, I'll take pity on you and tell you. Know, then, dearest, that the first aim and object which I have set before me is to hunt up that estimable but unaccountable person, Mr. Hodgson."

"To hunt up Mr. Hodgson?" gasped Hermia. "But for what purpose? What will you gain by doing that?"

"Whether I shall gain anything or nothing time alone can tell. In any case, when I have found him, I intend—metaphorically speaking—to grip him by the throat, and bid him stand and deliver. In other words, I mean to see what a personal interview will do towards wresting from him that secret—or, if not the secret itself, some clue to it, however faint—which I know you, my dear one, are so anxiously longing to fathom."

Hermia did not speak, but her eyes flushed with tears.

"It is quite possible that the old boy, when I tell him who I am, may refuse point-blank to discuss the matter with me. In that event I can't say what I shall do, or what course may seem best for me to follow. But the first thing to do is to find Mr. H. and tackle him."

"My poor boy!" replied Hermia, with a pitying smile. "You seem to have forgotten one important fact, which is, that none of us, not even Uncle John himself, is acquainted with Mr. Hodgson's address, or has the remotest notion where to find him. Uncle's letter in reply to his was simply addressed to the care of a certain firm of solicitors in London. Of course, it is open to you to go to the firm in question, and ask

them to oblige you with Mr. Hodgson's address ; but is it not rather doubtful whether they would comply with your request ?"

"Very doubtful, indeed," responded Clem, dryly. "So much so, that I don't think I shall trouble myself to go near them. I've a better plan than that for arriving at what I want to know."

Speaking thus he unbuttoned his coat, and from the breast-pocket drew forth an unsealed envelope, from which he proceeded to extract a small square of drawing-board, and then handed it to Hermia. On it was a pen-and-ink sketch of a man's head in profile.

An exclamation of surprise broke from Hermia the moment she set eyes on it.

"Why, it is Mr. Hodgson to the life !" she cried. "Aquiline nose, high stock, pointed collar and spectacles—the very man himself ! How did this come into your possession, dear ?"

"There's a pretty question to ask ! I did think you would have recognized my handiwork."

"Yours ? You clever darling ! Of course, I have known for a long time—which means for a few months—that you can draw and paint—a little ; but I did not know that you could hit anyone off in this sort of way."

"In the case of old Hodgson, you have only to draw his nose and chin in outline, and you have the man himself."

"But I had not the least idea that you had ever seen Mr. Hodgson."

"Neither had I, till the occasion of his last visit. You told me when he was expected, and I made it my business to look out for him and have a good stare at him. The moment I got back home I sat down and made the sketch I have just shown you."

"The likeness is unmistakable ; but I fail to see of what use it will be in enabling you to trace the original."

"As soon as I had finished my sketch I hurried off to

the railway station and sought out the station-master, to whom I am well known, through having attended his wife last winter when she was ill. Handing him the sketch I said, 'The original of this will leave here by train in the course of a few hours from now. I want you to ascertain for me to what station he books himself.' In the course of the evening I made a point of seeing the station-master again. 'The old gentleman with the remarkable nose,' he told me, 'had in his possession the second half of a return ticket between Stavinger and Ashdown, of which one of my men had collected the first half earlier in the day.' Inquiry on my part, my geographical knowledge being at fault, elicited the information that Stavinger is a small country town on the borders of Derbyshire and Yorkshire. Having thus got firm hold of what I may call link number one, I need scarcely inform so perspicacious a young person as yourself that the first step in the voyage of discovery I purpose taking will be to book myself to Stavinger, and, once there—as they say in boys' story-books—set to work to track the miscreant to his lair."

"It seems to me that you are a dreadfully artful creature, far more so, in fact, than I had any idea of," said Hermia, with a little toss of her head; "but I daresay if you were to fail as a doctor, you might perhaps find a situation on the detective force." But even while her tongue was thus gently flouting him, her eyes were speaking a different language, and one which by this time—so assiduous had been his studies—Clem had learned to read like a book.

A few more days sufficed to complete Clem's preparations. Titus Vallance came down from London, and was duly installed as his *locum tenens*. Neither to his brother nor to John Brancker did he afford the faintest hint that any object other than the need for change and rest was taking him from home.

Next morning he set out for the North. By the last post of the following day a letter from him reached

Hermia. She was surprised and delighted, not having expected one till next morning. She hurried to her room, broke the seal, and kissed the enclosure again and again before reading a single word.

After a few lines devoted to those sweet nothings which lovers delight in when they write to each other, the letter went on as follows :

"And now, dear, prepare yourself for what will be to you both a surprise and a disappointment. Mr. Hodgson is dead !

"It was late yesterday afternoon when I reached Stavinger. It is a town of but a few thousand inhabitants, and on inquiry I was told that the one good hotel in the place is the 'King's Arms.' As you will see by the heading of this letter, it is from there that I am now writing to you.

"By the time I had done dinner it was nearly dark, and it would evidently have been useless to set about anything till the morrow. While turning matters over in my mind, with no company but my cigar, it struck me that it might not be a bad plan to put a few questions to the landlord of the hotel. If Mr. Hodgson were at all known in the town he would be pretty sure to be in a position to supply me with his address and perhaps, also, to give me some further information about him, which might or might not prove of service to me.

"Accordingly, after breakfast this morning, I sought an interview with mine host—a chatty, communicative middle-aged man, who has lived in Stavinger nearly all his life. It was from him I learned the fact of Mr. Hodgson's demise ; but, in order to make sure that his Mr. Hodgson was the same as ours, I showed him my pen-and-ink sketch, which I had taken care to bring with me. He recognized the likeness in a moment.

"It would appear that Mr. Hodgson was a man of high standing in his profession, and the legal adviser to a number of the first families in Stavinger and its neigh-

borhood. Further inquiry elicited the information that he died within a week of the date of his last visit to Ashdown, which may possibly serve to account for the fact that Mr. Brancker's letter to him has remained unanswered. Mr. Hodgson had no partner in his business, nor, so far as is known to my landlord, has anyone been appointed as his successor.

"I must confess that I am taken very considerably aback by what has just been told me, and that for the present I am altogether nonplussed as to what my next step ought to be. However, I do not despair. Difficulties are made to be encountered and, if possible, overcome. In any case, I will write you again in the course of to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXXII.

CORRESPONDENCE.

From Clement Hazeldine to Hermia Rivers.

"IN the course of our many talks together, you have more than once confided to me certain details of your earliest impressions and recollections. What I now want you to do is, to shut your eyes and go back in memory to those early days, and then to write down in detail, and with careful minuteness, everything you can call to mind about your childhood previously to your adoption by Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte. I am afraid that all you can tell me will amount to very little, but I want the information in question for a certain purpose, about which I may have more to tell you by-and-bye. Meanwhile, I shall await your reply with as much patience—or as little—as Providence has seen fit to endow me with."

From Hermia Rivers to Clement Hazeldine.

"You are quite right in your assumption that any-

thing I may be able to tell you of my earliest recollections will amount to very little. Until I heard from Uncle John the story of his adoption of me, I had no absolute knowledge of any existence apart from, or prior to, my life with him and Aunt Charlotte. It is true that I seemed to remember certain people and certain incidents with whom or which uncle and aunt seemed to be in no way mixed up, although there was nothing to prove to me that I was not living under uncle's roof at the time to which they referred. Indeed, so shadowy were they that at times there came over me a doubt as to whether they had any basis of fact whatever ; and in any case they lived in my recollections as so many faded pictures, which each year that passed tended to render dimmer and more indistinct ; and there is little question that had it not been for what Uncle John told me they would by-and-bye have vanished utterly from my memory.

"Uncle John, as you are aware, had no information to give me beyond the fact that, after he had arranged to adopt me, I was taken to his house one evening after dark by a respectable-looking, middle-aged woman, who, judging from her appearance, might be the wife of a well-to-do mechanic. Uncle asked no questions and the woman proffered no statement. She was not more than five minutes in the house, and he never saw her again.

"Well, Uncle John's statement threw me back upon myself, so to speak. Again and again I went over my confused and half-forgotten recollections, striving to piece them together, and bring them into clearer relief, but to very little purpose, I'm afraid. However, I will now proceed to sketch for you in outline the three incidents, if I may term them such, which stand out most definitely in my memory as evidently pertaining to a time which I now know must have been anterior to that of my adoption.

"Incident the first. I see myself, as a very little girl, seated in a shut-up carriage in company with a man and

a woman, neither of whose faces I can bring to mind. I am hugging to my breast a gaily-dressed doll as my dearest earthly treasure. It is a gloomy evening, and the rain is falling fast. I seem to have been in the carriage a long time, jolting over the dreary country roads, but as to where I came from and how I happened to be there at all, I can remember nothing whatever. Then I seem to wake up from sleep, roused by the sudden stoppage of the carriage, and, looking out, I see someone open two large iron gates, which swing slowly back on their hinges. But what takes my childish attention more than anything else is the fact that on the top of one of the supporting pillars—I can only see one from where I sit—there is fixed a strange-looking animal carved in stone, as it might be a griffin, or a dragon, holding a shield between its paws. But one half of the shield and one of the creature's paws are broken away and missing, and I remember thinking how strangely forlorn it looked in its maimed condition, and how the rain-drops, trickling from the end of its nose, seemed like tears, so that I felt quite to pity the poor thing.

“After that comes a blank.

“In the next scene of which I retain anything like a clear recollection—although how long a time elapsed between it and the preceding one I am unable to say—I am in a gloomy panelled room, the two high, narrow windows of which look out upon a small, semi-circular lawn shut in by a tall hedge. A case-clock in one corner ticks slowly and solemnly. Against the wall on one side of the room stands a tall bureau of black oak carved with fruit and quaint figures. There is a large open fireplace, in which a few embers glow faintly red. On two high, straight-backed chairs sit two angular, straight-backed ladies; both elderly, both with long, thin faces, both having the same cold, unsympathetic eyes and the same frozen expression, and so much alike generally, that I can only now conclude they must have been sisters. As I stand before them in my white

frock and bronze shoes, with my hands behind my back, I glance timidly from one to the other. They are talking about me in a language I don't understand ; but all the same, I am quite aware that I am the subject of their conversation. It is growing dusk, and presently a man—the same, I fancy, that was with me in the carriage—brings in two lighted candles in silver candlesticks on a silver tray, and sets them down on the table between the two ladies. Then one of the ladies takes up the snuffers—also of silver—and solemnly extinguishes one of the candles. Somehow, I have an impression, how or whence derived I am quite at a loss to know, that it is a nightly custom for the manservant to bring in two lighted candles, and for one of them to be at once put out.

“The manservant, having raked together the dying embers in the grate, is on the point of leaving the room, when the same lady who had put out the candle holds up her hand, covered with a black lace mitten, to arrest him. ‘You may take her away,’ she says, evidently alluding to me. ‘I have no wish ever to see her again.’ With that, the man leads me by the hand from the room, and with the shutting of the door everything becomes a blank again.

“Next I am in bed, where I am awakened by a kiss on my forehead. I open two sleepy eyes, to see for a moment a tall figure in white stealing from the room with a night-light in her hand. I do not see her face, but something tells me it is one of the two ladies whom I saw in the panelled room, but not the one who ordered me to be taken away.

“Such, dear Clement, are the particulars of three scenes which live more vividly in my memory than any others of a date prior to my passing into the charge of Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte. I fail to see how they can prove of the slightest service to you in the quest you have undertaken for the sake of one who can

but wish herself more worthy of so much love and devotion."

Clement Hazeldine to Hermia Rivers.

"You were altogether wrong, dearest, in assuming that the particulars which I received from you three days ago would prove of no service to me, as shall now be demonstrated to you.

"All along—that is to say, from the time I became aware that Mr. Hodgson had been practising in Stavinger for considerably more than a quarter of a century—the probability has seemed to me that the person or persons who employed him as their agent in your case would be found, if found at all, no great distance away from this place. In any case, and more especially after the receipt of your letter, I determined to make Stavinger the centre of a systematic process of search and inquiry, which I at once proceeded to put in execution. 'But a search for what?' I seem to hear you asking. You shall now be told.

"The first thing I did was to hire a dog-cart, and in addition secure the services of a driver who knew every road and lane for a dozen miles round Stavinger. Thus equipped, I began my quest. The object I set before me first of all was to find a pair of old-fashioned lodge gates, one of the pillars of which was surmounted by a griffin rampant, or other heraldic monstrosity, supporting a broken shield, but minus one of its paws. For two days I scoured the country roads and byeways, but to no purpose. Plenty of lodge gates I saw, surmounted, some of them, by one or another design in stone or stucco, but nowhere the particular one I was in search of. This morning, however, I was more fortunate.

"My driver had taken a road which we had not explored before. We had not gone more than three miles when we came to a pair of lodge gates of wrought iron, which drew my attention by their ruinous and ne-

glected condition. The driver stopped at my request and I alighted in order to examine them more closely. The gates themselves, which were of an intricate and finely-wrought pattern, and must at one time have been very beautiful, were now thickly rusted and filthy with the grime of years, and having fallen forward a little, hung loosely together as though they were trying to support each other in their hour of misfortune. The padlock and chain which fastened them seemed to indicate that they were rarely, if ever, opened. Close by, however, there was an arched entrance in the wall, evidently intended for pedestrians, with a rude, unpainted door which formed a fitting complement to the rusted gates. No figure of any kind crowned the square free-stone pillars on which the gates were hung, yet they seemed to me to have a bare and unfinished aspect, as though they lacked some crowning adornment.

"Pushing open the rude door, which yielded to my hand, I entered the park. Inside were the remains of what had at one time been a two-storied lodge, which was now little more than the skeleton of a house, with huge gaps in its roof and a great part of its flooring gone, and scarcely a whole pane in its window-frames. Unsightly weeds and great prickly brambles grew all about, and, in short, the whole scene was one of melancholy neglect and decay. Stepping backward a pace or two, while wondering whether it would be worth my while to sketch the ruined lodge and its surroundings, I caught my foot against some hard substance in the rank grass, and with difficulty saved myself from falling. On looking down to ascertain the nature of the obstruction, my eyes caught sight of something which, as the saying goes, brought my heart into my mouth. There, half-buried among the docks and weeds, lay the identical object I had been at such pains to find—your mutilated griffin to wit, with its broken shield. How it had come there mattered nothing, but only that it was there: I drew a long breath, feeling little doubt that I

had now in my hands the second link of the chain of which the first had been the tracing of Mr. Hodgson. Where shall I find the third?

"The poor griffin, or whatever it may have been intended to represent, was lying on its side and looking very forlorn and dirty indeed. The first thing I did was to raise it into an upright position, then, with my pocket-knife, I partially cleared a small space around it of weeds and grass, and then I proceeded to make a sketch of it. That sketch I now send you for the purpose of verification. It seems to me most unlikely that there should have been two mutilated griffins and two broken shields; still, that such may have been the case is by no means impossible. But be that as it may, do not fail to drop me a line by return post and let me know whether you recognize the creature as being anything like the one seen by you that day out of the carriage window while waiting for the opening of the park gates.

"As soon as I got back to the dog-cart I began to question the driver, but all I could elicit from him was that the name of the mansion inside the park, of which, however, nothing could be seen from the lodge, is Broome, and that its sole inmate, with the exception of a few domestics, is a certain Miss Pengarvon, a lady well advanced in years, whom the fellow described in terse but caustic terms, as being 'a reg'lar old varmint, and no mistake.'

"To-morrow I shall prosecute my inquiries with regard to the aforesaid Miss Pengarvon."

Hermia Rivers to Clement Hazeldine.

"The sketch you have sent me is an exact counterpart of the sculptured creature seen by me so many years ago. The sight of it has brought back the whole scene to my memory as freshly as if it belonged to yesterday."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE QUEST CONTINUED.

From Clement Hazeldine to Hermia Rivers.

"HAVING written and posted my last letter to you, I lost no time in asking Mr. Gruding, the landlord of the hotel where I am staying, to again favor me with his company for a short time. It was from him I had obtained my information about Mr. Hodgson, and it seemed not unlikely that he might be able to supply me with some particulars anent Miss Pengarvon, of Broome.

"Nor was I mistaken. Gruding had much that was interesting to tell me in answer to the questions I put to him ; all of which shall be re-told you fully when next we meet.

"The interview with my landlord took place on Saturday. Having decided upon seeing Miss Pengarvon for myself, I made my way yesterday morning to the church she is in the habit of attending, which is situated on the outskirts of the village of Dritton, and within half-a-mile of the Hall ; and there, in a square, old-fashioned pew, shut up by herself in isolated dignity, sat the last living representative of the old family.

"I was fortunate enough to be so placed as to have a good view of Miss Pengarvon during the progress of the service, and I took care to be standing close to the porch when she emerged from the church. She was followed by an old serving man, who limped somewhat, and who carried his mistress's capacious umbrella and large-print prayer-book.

"Enclosed is a sketch-likeness of Miss Pengarvon, elaborated from a rougher sketch which I made seated on a tombstone, as soon as the congregation had dispersed and I was left alone.

"Now I want you, dearest, to tell me whether you

can detect in the sketch any resemblance to either of the two ladies whom you saw that evening in the oak-panelled room, as described by you in your last letter but one."

Hermia Rivers to Clement Hazeldine.

"Without committing myself to a positive statement, I can safely say that the sketch of Miss Pengarvon, which I received from you this morning, bears a marked resemblance to the face of the elder of the two sisters—if sisters they were—as stored up in my memory all these years. More than that it would not be safe for me to say."

If Clem had been troubled by any faint doubts before as to whether he was on the right track, the receipt of Hermia's last note would have served to finally dissipate them. Being satisfied so far, he was at once faced by the question, what ought his next step to be? It was a question hard to answer, because it seemed to him that beyond the point at which he had now arrived he had no sure ground to go upon.

As far as he had gone each step he had taken had pointed the way to the next; but he now found himself, as it were, confronted by a dead wall. Despite all he had discovered so far, he felt that he had no sufficient basis of facts to warrant him in going to Miss Pengarvon. What, indeed, could he say to her if he sought and obtained an interview? He would simply be showing his hand prematurely, with the result, in all likelihood, of defeating the very object he had in view.

But although he could not see his way to call upon the mistress of Broome, Clement was by no means minded to give up his quest at the point to which he had now brought it, and admit his inability to push it to a further issue. Somewhere in the dark must be hidden another link of the chain, if only he knew in which direction to put forth his hands and grope for it.

Two or three days passed without bringing him any suggestion that seemed worth following up. Then, on the third forenoon, as he stood leaning over a gate in a country lane, staring at nothing in particular in a somewhat disconsolate mood, he said to himself: "Perhaps if I could obtain access to the old Hall, and were allowed to go over it, I might chance to light on something which would furnish me with a hint or a clue to that which I am so anxious to find out." The course in question seemed such an obvious one that he was surprised it had failed to suggest itself to him before.

As soon as he got back to the hotel he sought another interview with his landlord, who opened his eyes to their fullest extent when told his guest's object in sending for him. He, Gruding, had never heard of anybody who wanted to go over Broome. It wasn't a show place, and, as far as he knew, there was nothing in it worth seeing. But granting that anyone should want to go over it, he didn't for a moment suppose that Miss Pengarvon would allow them to do so. Still, he might be wrong. He had reason to believe that his barmaid's brother was engaged to a young woman who was in service at Broome, and there was no doubt the young fellow in question could easily get to know through his sweetheart whether there was any likelihood of a stranger being allowed to explore the interior of the Hall.

At Clement's request a message was sent to Mark Finch—that being the young fellow's name—asking him to call upon Doctor Hazeldine at the "King's Arms" as soon as his day's work was over. In due course he made his appearance, and great was his astonishment when told what he was wanted for. Like the landlord, he had never heard of anybody who was anxious to explore the old mansion; nor did he believe they would be allowed to do so. However he would ask his sweetheart, Lucy Grice, whom he was going to meet that

evening, and would let the gentleman know her opinion in the matter by breakfast-time next morning.

Lucy's opinion proved to be merely a confirmation of those already enunciated by Gruding and Mark Finch, except that it was expressed in still more emphatic terms. Anybody, she said, who was acquainted with Miss Pengarvon would know quite well that on no account whatever would that lady allow a stranger, who could allege the gratification of an idle curiosity as his only motive for wanting to do so, to set foot across the threshold of Broome. Many people in Clem's place would have given up the point as hopeless; but he was composed of more stubborn stuff. Mark Finch was told to come again in the evening, when he would have time for a long talk with Dr. Hazeldine.

Into the details of the conversation that passed between the two it is not needful that we should enter. Mark and Lucy, it seemed, were desirous of getting married, and were saving up towards housekeeping with that end in view. Towards the fund thus being accumulated Clem offered to contribute five pounds, on condition that Lucy, unknown to the other inmates, should admit him to the Hall, and show him over that part of it which was shut up and unoccupied. The girl would be at his heels the whole time he was inside the house, and would be able to watch his every movement; while, finally, he engaged that an hour and a half at most should elapse between the time of his entering the house and leaving it.

The temptation proved too strong for the lovers to resist. Lucy foresaw no difficulty in carrying out her part of the scheme. Once a month her uncle, Barney Dale, went to Marrowfield, as he had done for the last quarter of a century, to dispose of the work of his mistress's needle. Three days hence was his time for going, and Dr. Hazeldine's exploration must take place while he was away. Breakfast would be over, and Miss Pengarvon, intent on her work in the Green Parlor, would

hear nothing. As a further safeguard, however, it might be as well if the young doctor were to wear a pair of list slippers over his boots.

As it was arranged so it was carried out. Clement was surreptitiously admitted at the side entrance about half-an-hour after Barney had taken his departure. Under the guidance of the girl he tramped upstairs and down in his list slippers, passing from one unused room to another, having here a shutter opened for him, so as to let in a modified daylight, and there a blind partly drawn up. Many of the rooms were entirely denuded of furniture, while in others what there was of it was sheeted up in brown holland. Everywhere the dust lay thick and heavy ; the clouded mirrors could but reflect the ghosts, as it were, of the young man and the girl as they passed in front of them. Nearly every corner was festooned with huge cobwebs ; behind the wainscoting the mice squeaked and scampered ; everything was touched by the mouldering finger of decay. When Clement and his guide spoke to each other it was as people speak in the chamber of death.

Last of all they came to the picture-gallery, where hung some score or more portraits of dead and gone Pengarvons. A lozenge-paned oriel window at one end, the upper half of which was filled with painted glass, suffused the gallery with a faintly-tinted half-light, which seemed fitly to accord with the place and the throng of dumbly-staring effigies on its walls. Clem walked up to the oriel and gazed out into the grounds, while Lucy proceeded to open the shutters of two of the long windows which fronted the portraits. Presently Clem's eyes came back to the window, and to a recognition of the fact that sundry names and initials had been scratched with a diamond here and there on its panes. Among them he found one which sent a sudden rush of blood to his heart the moment his eyes lighted on it. Surmounted by a true lover's knot, and with the date 1649 below, were the two names " Hermia Moray "

and "Rupert Pengarvon." Here was proof positive of one thing—that "Hermia" was a name not unknown in the Pengarvon annals upwards of two centuries ago. Clem felt that this discovery alone amply rewarded him for his exploration of the Hall. Presently he turned to examine the portraits. One after another his gaze took them in till the series was exhausted. They comprised both sexes, and some of the oldest of them, judging from their costumes, seemed to date back to the time of the First or Second Charles, but apparently none were more modern than the first decade of the present century. Then Clement went back to one of the portraits, and stood gazing at it in silence for a long time. It was the likeness of a girl of nineteen or twenty, wearing a short-waisted white robe, a broad blue sash, and a wide-brimmed hat with sweeping plumes over an elaborate arrangement of curls and loosely-coiled tresses. Taken simply as a work of art, it was the gem of the gallery, and Clem at once set it down as being from the brush of either Lawrence or Sir Joshua. But what struck him more than aught else was the strange, haunting likeness it bore to Hermia. Not merely was it that the eyes and hair of one and the other approximated closely in color, and that the features of both might almost have been cast in the same mould, there was an indescribable something, a sort of spiritual likeness, so to call it, which brought them into closer affinity than any mere similarity of physical attributes would have served to do. Long and earnestly did Clement gaze at the beautiful face with its hovering smile, and its fathomless violet eyes which seemed as if they were reading his inmost thoughts. Lucy, when questioned, could tell him nothing about the original. She had only been in the gallery once before, and felt anything but comfortable with all those staring eyes following her every movement. But it would not do to linger there forever. Clem had brought sketching materials with him in readiness for any emergency that might arise, and he now proceeded,

with a few bold, swift touches, to secure the salient points of the likeness which had for him an interest far exceeding that of all the other portraits put together.

He left Stavinger by the afternoon train that same day, and a few hours later was back at home.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

ANOTHER LINK.

BUT Clement Hazeldine's business at Stavinger was by no means at an end. A certain purpose, the outcome of his visit to Broome, had taken him back to Ashdown; but that accomplished to his satisfaction, which it was in the course of a few days, he lost no time in returning to the scene of his further operations.

Among other information for which he was indebted to Lucy Grice, he had learned that her uncle, Barney Dale, was in the habit of spending a couple of hours, two or three evenings a week, in the bar-parlor of the "Chequers" Inn at Dritton, where he smoked his pipe and imbibed his tankard of ale in the company of sundry cronies whose tastes in that respect were similar to his own. On inquiry, Clem found that they had one spare bed at the "Chequers," which he at once engaged, and there he proceeded to take up his quarters, leaving his portmanteau, however, in his old lodging at Stavinger. Dritton was a tiny hamlet of some three or four hundred inhabitants, and as there were more than one good trout stream in the neighborhood, Clem, who had brought his rod and tackle with him, passed for a disciple of the gentle craft, and was welcomed as such among the frequenters of the bar-parlor. The advent of a stranger who was in no way "stuck-up," and not above hob-nobbing with one or another of them, made a pleasant break in the monotony of their meetings, and freshened up their provincial wits for the time in a way which surprised no one more than themselves.

But it was to Barney Dale that Clem paid the most assiduous court, so contriving matters as to occupy the seat next his, and to engage him in talk about such subjects as the old man was likely to take an interest in. He soon found that under a somewhat crabbed and forbidding exterior, Barney hid a personality at once quaint and kindly, and, in some respects, of an almost child-like simplicity. On more than one occasion, as they sat side by side, Clem tried to bring the conversation round to Broome and its mistress ; but Barney became at once so stolidly dull, and was so evidently disinclined to touch on the subject in any way, that, for fear of rendering him suspicious as to his ulterior motives, he felt it best to lead back the talk into other and less personal channels.

It was Clem's object to take the old man unawares, in the hope that, in the first moment of surprise, he might unwittingly let fall some exclamation or remark which would help to indicate the direction in which his next step should be taken.

On a certain evening, after he had been about a week at the "Chequers," Clem was lounging purposely at the door when Barney, with the help of his stout black-thorn, came limping slowly up. After greetings had passed, Clem said :

"Just come into this room for a moment, Mr. Dale. I have something I want to show you."

With that he opened the door of a side room, and Barney followed him in. Having shut the door and turned up the gas, Clem took from the table a "tinted" cabinet-size photograph, and placed it in the old man's hands. It was Hermia's portrait, which he had that morning received from an Ashdown photographer. In it she was represented in a short-waisted white robe, a blue sash, and a grey, broad-brimmed hat with a feather of the same color ; while, under her lover's directions, her chestnut locks had been arranged after a fashion to

which they had never had to submit before, and in all probability never would again.

"Put on your glasses, Mr. Dale," said Clem, "and look at this, and tell me whether you recognize it as the likeness of anyone you have ever seen or known."

Putting down the photograph for a moment till he had got his spectacles astride his nose, Barney took it up again, and moving closer under the gaslight, brought his eyes to bear upon it. After staring at it for a full half-minute, his hands began to tremble, and he turned on Clem a face that was working with suppressed emotion.

"Whose likeness is this?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Do you not recognize it as a photograph of a certain picture in the gallery at Broome, with which you are doubtless well acquainted?"

Again the old man turned his gaze on the portrait. "Aye, aye, to be sure, I know it now," he said; and yet there was an echo of doubt in his tone. "It's a likeness of Miss Elinor Pengarvon, who lived eighty or ninety years syne, and was engaged to Lord Doverley, but died a week afore her wedding-day. I mind me of the picture well. But—but how did you come by it?" he added glowering at the other with eyes which had suddenly become charged with a sort of fierce suspicion.

"It is time to undeceive you," said Clement. "The likeness in your hands is not that of the Elinor Pengarvon of ninety years ago, but of another young lady who is alive and well at this moment. It is the portrait of Miss Hermia Rivers."

Clement had nothing to go upon as to whether the mention of the name would wake any dormant echo in Barney's memory. He could only trust to chance that it might do so. As it proved, his hit was a fortunate one.

"Of Miss Hermia Rivers!" repeated the old man, in a sort of awed whisper. "Can the dead come back to life?" Then his eyes went again to the portrait. "But

you say that she isn't dead—that she is alive and well ; is it the truth you are telling me ?”

“ I was in the company of Miss Rivers less than a fortnight ago.”

“ Thank goodness that she still lives ! M'appen, then, it may not be too late.”

“ Too late ! What do you mean ?” asked Clem.

But the old man sank into a chair and took no heed of the question.

“ And I to have got it into my doited old head that the darling died long years ago !” he said presently, with the air of one who is talking to himself. “ To be sure it was the mistress herself that led me to think so, and how was I to guess that she wanted to hide the truth ?”

Presently he roused himself, and after staring at Clem for a few moments like one collecting his faculties, he said, laying a finger on the photograph :

“ And you say, sir, that you know her, and that she is alive and well ?”

“ I do say so,” answered Clement, in his most impressive tones.

“ Tell me about her—tell me all you know,” exclaimed Barney, with trembling eagerness.

Accordingly, without going into any superfluous details, Clement proceeded to give his hearer an outline of Hermia's history from the date of her adoption by John Brancker onward. He was careful to speak slowly and distinctly, and as Barney's intelligence took in one point of the narrative after another, he nodded his head and muttered a word or two under his breath, but otherwise he kept silent till Clem had come to an end.

“ And now that I have told you so much, Mr. Dale,” continued Clem, after a pause, “ I trust that you, in your turn, will be able to answer me one or two questions. In the first place, will you be good enough to inform me what relation Miss Hermia Rivers is to Miss Pengarvon ?”

Barney blinked at his questioner and sucked in his under-lip for a moment or two, then he said :

"I darena tell you aught, and you mustna ask me. Years and years ago my mistress bound me down by oath, never without her leave to open my lips about certain things to man, woman, or child. It was a very solemn oath, and I darena break it."

Clement was nonplussed. "At least, you can tell me this," he said presently. "Is either of Miss Rivers's parents still living?"

"I darena answer, and you mustna ask me," was the old man's dogged reply.

"Clem made a gesture of annoyance. "Come, then, Mr. Dale," he said, "you can hardly refuse to tell me what you meant by your remark just now, that, perhaps, it 'may not be too late.'"

Barney was sitting with rounded shoulders, resting his chin on his hands, which were crossed over his stick. For a little while he did not answer.

"Bring her down to Stavinger," he said, at last, bending a slow look on the young surgeon, "and I'll contrive for the mistress to see her. Who can tell what may come of it?" Then for the second time he said : "And I to have got it into my doited old head that the darling died ever so many years ago !"

He rose with a little difficulty, and possessed himself of his hat which he had taken off on entering the room. Then, laying a hand on Clem's shoulder, he said, impressively,

"Eh, but there's a great change come over the mistress ! She had a sort of fit in the night about a week ago, and now the doctor comes to see her every day. But she's getting round again—oh, yes, she's getting round ; and m'appen, by-and-bye, she'll be just the same as she allus was. And now, sir, do you listen to this : Don't say a word to a soul about Miss Hermia, or what brings her to Stavinger. The Lord only knows

what'll come of it all, but I'll try my best—I'll try my best."

In the course of the next day, Clement returned to Ashdown, where a great surprise awaited him. He reached Nairn Cottage soon after five o'clock, but found no Hermia there to greet him. Instead, a note was put into his hand by Aunt Charlotte.

"DEAR CLEMENT"—it ran.

"I have had to set off, all in a hurry, for London, where I purpose staying for the next few days with my friend, Mrs. Wingate, who was a schoolfellow of mine. I have what seem to me amply sufficient reasons for taking this step, but I do not feel at liberty to enter into any particulars until after my return, when I may have much to tell you, or, on the other hand, very little. Anyway, I hope you won't worry the least bit about me, because there is really no occasion to do so. I received your telegram this morning announcing your return, but, under the circumstances, have thought it better not to wait and see you. I will explain everything when we meet, which I hope will not be later than two or three days hence.

"Yours now and always,

"HERMIA RIVERS."

Clement, when he had read the note, stared at Aunt Charlotte with an air of stupefaction. "What does it mean?" he asked.

"I can tell you very little more than the note tells you," was the reply. "Yesterday was Hermia's afternoon for visiting among the poor widows and others whom she is in the habit of calling upon once a week, and oftener in cases of sickness or necessity. On reaching home last evening rather later than usual, she told us that Mrs. Varrel, a widow whom both of us have known for some years, was dead. She was very quiet during the rest of the evening, and seemed to be deep in thought. This morning, at breakfast, she announced

her intention of starting for London by the eleven o'clock train. In answer to the questions John and I naturally put to her, she simply said that we must forgive her for not telling us anything at present, but that all should be explained the moment she returned. She assured us that nothing but a matter of extreme importance would have induced her to take such a step, but that we might be quite satisfied as to her safety under the roof of Mrs. Wingate. So you see, my dear Mr. Clement, that we shall just have to stifle our curiosity as best we can, till it pleases her ladyship to return and lift us off the tenterhooks of suspense."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE WIDOW VARREL.

MISS BRANCKER, so far as her means allowed, was one of the most charitable of women. She had always a number of pensioners on hand, chiefly elderly spinsters, with whom life was a continual struggle, and widows left forlorn without son or daughter to help them in their declining years.

Miss Brancker had a small—a very small—private income, the whole of which of late years, since her brother's salary had more than sufficed for the needs of the little household, she had given away in charity, not by any means always in the form of money, but in a score of other ways in which help, judiciously administered, may be made still more precious to its recipients. As Hermia grew up, she got into the way of accompanying her aunt on her weekly visits among those whom Miss Brancker held it to be a part of her duty to call upon at their own homes. During the last year and a half, however, in consequence of an affection of the knee-joint, which made much walking painful to Aunt Charlotte, Hermia had, in the majority of cases, been compelled to do the visiting alone.

Among others whom Hermia made a point of calling upon at least once a week was a certain poor widow, Mrs. Varrel by name, who was slowly dying of an incurable malady. She had lost her husband, a retired sergeant-major with a small service pension, several years before, and latterly her sole means of livelihood had been a few shillings a week allowed her by a daughter of her former mistress, for at one time Mrs. Varrel had been maid to a lady of quality; a fact she was careful to impress upon all who were brought into contact with her. There had been a time after her husband's death, a period extending over several years, when her only son was in a position to help her, and when, in point of fact, he did help her liberally in accordance with his means. Then something dreadful had come to pass, and Richard Varrel had been able to help his mother no more.

It was this same Richard Varrel who, as the reader may or may not remember, had been one of the first on the day of the trial to congratulate John Brancker on his acquittal. He it was who, when John and those who were with him had settled themselves in the fly in which they were to be driven home, had pushed his way through the little crowd of onlookers and laid a detaining hand on the vehicle. "Mr. Brancker, sir," he said, in a voice coarsened with drink, "if such a wretch as I may be allowed to thank heaven for anything, then I thank it that you are once more a free man. From the first I swore that whoever else might be guilty of Mr. Hazeldine's death, you were innocent. As for him—curse him! he hounded me to my ruin, and he deserved his fate. For him no pity is needed."

Up to a certain point the fortunes of Richard Varrel and Ephraim Judd had moved upon almost parallel lines. The mother of each was a widow in poor circumstances; they had both been educated at the same school, where they had both been show scholars; the elder Mr. Avison had taken a fancy to both of them,

and had found humble berths for them in the Bank, where, in the course of time, they had worked themselves up to positions of trust and responsibility. But there the likeness between the two had ended, for while Ephraim Judd was a painstaking plodder, slow but sure, handsome Dick Varrel carried everything with a dash and a laughing quick-wittedness which made light of every obstacle that stood in the way of his upward career. There had been a time when he was one of the most popular young fellows in the town; but it was his social success and his fondness for company that proved his ruin. In a moment of weakness, when hard pressed by petty monetary difficulties, he did a certain thing which rendered him liable to a prosecution for felony. Detection followed. By this time the elder Mr. Avison had retired from business, and the younger one was abroad. To the latter the details of the case were reported by Mr. Hazeldine in due course, who went as far as he durst venture in his endeavors to induce the banker to take a lenient view of the affair. But Mr. Avison, while being a strictly just man, was also an inflexible one, and he sent positive orders, by return, that Varrel should be proceeded against. Mr. Hazeldine had no option but to carry out his employer's instructions, the consequence being that the handsome and popular Dick Varrel was tried and sentenced to a short term of penal servitude.

That term had expired about a year before he accosted John Brancker on the day of the latter's acquittal. How long Varrel had been in the town prior to that date, and how long he stayed there after it, John had no means of knowing. In any case, he saw him no more.

Mrs. Varrel rented a couple of rooms in one of the humblest parts of the town. Even on her bed of sickness, which she was quite aware that she should never leave till she had drawn her last breath, she held herself somewhat proudly aloof from the class of persons

around her. "It is my misfortune to be compelled to live among them," she would sometimes remark to Hermia, "but I never allow them to consider that they are in any way my equals." Even with the hand of death upon her, she could not forget that for five years she had been confidential maid to Lady Warlingham. How near to breaking her heart her son's crime and its punishment had gone no one ever knew but herself. At the time she had in a measure set the world at defiance, by her protestations that Dick had been convicted on false evidence ; and the world, or that infinitesimal section of it to which she had appealed, compassionating her as a mother, had made believe (while in her sight and hearing) to indorse her view of the case. For some time past, however, no one had heard her mention her son's name. He seemed as one lost to her for ever.

Mrs. Varrel always seemed especially glad to see Hermia. "You never preach at me as nearly all my other lady visitors do, and that's what I like you for," she would say. "As for them, they can't leave me an ounce of tea without reminding me that I'm not long for this world—as if I didn't know it already—and exhorting me to seek forgiveness of my sins. By the way some of them talk I might be one of the vilest of sinners. Yet, I suppose, if I were to reply that, so far as I am aware, I have led just as good a life as they, and stand no more in need of forgiveness than they do, they would be highly indignant. I only wish some of them could be made to change places with me for a single week. It would teach them a lesson they wouldn't forget to their dying day."

Hermia was in the habit of taking wine and grapes and whatever else Aunt Charlotte thought might tempt the sick woman's appetite, or help to keep up her strength ; for during the last few weeks her illness had made great strides, and day by day it became more evident that the end could not much longer be delayed.

Sometimes Hermia read to her ; sometimes she simply chatted with her, telling her such items of local gossip as she thought would interest her. Sometimes Mrs. Varrel, when she felt a little stronger, would talk to the girl about her early life and things that had happened years before ; but never once, till the end was drawing very near, did she make any mention of her son.

At length, however, there came a day when, after lying for a little space with closed eyes, she said :

"Do you know, Miss Hermy, what the one wish is I have now left in this world ?"

Hermia smiled and shook her head.

"I might guess a dozen times without guessing aright. But tell me what it is you wish, Mrs. Varrel."

"It is to see my son Richard for the last time—him, you know, that was said to have gone wrong years ago."

"Surely that is a wish which ought to be very easily gratified," said Hermia. "I am, of course, assuming that you know where he may be found."

"Where he himself is I cannot say, but when I saw him last he gave me a certain address in London where he said a letter would always find him."

"Then let me write to him in your name," said Hermia, eagerly. "He cannot be aware how ill you are, or he would have been to see you before now."

But it was not till the following day that the widow could be induced to let Hermia write, and not then till she had given her promise not to reveal to any one Richard Varrel's address.

It was just a week before the end came that Hermia wrote, but day passed after day without bringing a response of any kind. The dying woman listened with an eagerness painful to witness, for her son's footfall on the stairs, but listened in vain.

"Who knows but that he's in trouble again and can't come," she moaned wearily to herself more than once.

During those last few days Hermia was a great deal

with her. The person in whose house Mrs. Varrel lodged happened also to be ill at the time, and could not wait upon her as she had been in the habit of doing. As the dying woman's weakness increased she began to wander in her mind, but in all her wanderings her son seemed somehow to be mixed up. As far as Hermia could make out, he appeared to be always in some dire trouble from which his mother was vainly trying to extricate him ; but there was nothing coherent about her utterances—they were merely a jumble of disconnected sentences, the gaps between which her listener lacked the knowledge needful to enable her to fill up. But, indeed, Hermia took very little heed of anything that fell from the widow's lips at such times, but waited patiently till the light of reason came back to her poor bewildered brain, for such wanderings were only occasional ; the greater part of the time she was as mentally clear as ever she had been.

One day, however—it was the third day before she died—while one of her wandering fits was on her, she gave utterance to a remark which startled Hermia not a little. "There's blood on the notes !" she exclaimed. "Why should you want me to have charge of them ? Take them back ! I won't touch them !" Then her voice died away in an inarticulate murmur. After that it was impossible for Hermia to do otherwise than listen.

About an hour later, after a long silence, the dying woman cried out in a voice which sent a shiver through the girl, "No, no, I won't believe it ! What ! My boy—my Richard ! Anyone but him—anyone but him !" Then later still, as before, "There's blood on the notes ! I won't touch them !"

Hermia went home that night in a maze of perplexity and wonder. She felt as if she were standing on the verge of some dark mystery which might or might not be presently illumined for her by some unexpected

flash. She knew not what to think, what to do. What, indeed, could she do? She told herself nothing.

Next day Mrs. Varrel was perceptibly weaker, and although her mind wandered at times, her voice was so faint that it was only now and then it rose above a whisper. One connected sentence and no more, but one full of significance, reached the ears of the wondering girl. "Thirty—forty—fifty bright new sovereigns. Not one of them will I touch till you have told me where you got them from—not one!"

Did she fancy she was addressing her son? If not, whom?

It was an hour or two later. Mrs. Varrel had been asleep. Suddenly she awoke, and sat up in bed without help, a thing she had not been able to do for several weeks. The clear light of sanity had come back to her eyes. Laying a hand on Hermia's wrist, she said in a quavering voice. "He won't come now. I feel it—I know it. Before it is too late—and very soon it will be—I have something to give into your charge, Miss Hermie—something which I want you to promise to send to my boy after I'm gone, with just a line to say how his mother longed to see him before she died, but that she loved him to the last in spite of all." Then, after glancing round, although there was no one but themselves in the room, she drew Hermia closer to her and whispered, "It's money—money, my dear Miss Hermie, that I want to give into your charge."

"Whatever I can do in the way of helping you to carry out your wishes, Mrs. Varrel, you may rely upon my doing," replied the girl, in her most earnest tones.

Thereupon, by the widow's direction, she searched for and found two small packets which had been hidden away between the mattress and the bed. One of them was a stout envelope sealed with red wax, containing some soft substance, the nature of which Hermia was at a loss to make out. The other was a small canvas bag full of money. Then, still by the dying woman's re-

quest, she procured paper and string and made the two up into one parcel, which she addressed to Richard Varrel, at the same place to which the letter had been addressed.

"You will send it to him by post, dear Miss Hermy, after I'm gone, won't you, with just a line, as you promised?" gasped Mrs. Varrel.

"But seeing that your son has failed to respond to the note I wrote him," replied Hermia, "is it not possible that he may have gone away without informing you; and should that be the case what will become of the money?"

"I never thought of that," gasped Mrs. Varrel, with a sudden scared look. "And yet he must have the money—he must! Tell me—tell me, Miss Hermy, what is to be done?"

For a few moments Hermia did not answer—she could not. Her nerves had just undergone a shock which had left her as white and trembling as if she had seen a ghost. Drawing a deep breath, and speaking as steadily as she could force herself to do, she presently said:

"I will myself take the parcel to London, and if it be anyhow possible, I will find your son and deliver it into his hands and into those of no one else."

The dying woman thanked her and blessed her. It was evident that a great weight had been lifted off her mind.

Next day when Hermia went to see her she was unconscious, and a few hours later she breathed her last.

What was it that had so strangely affected Hermia; that had sent the blood surging round her heart, and had caused the room and its contents to rock before her eyes as though shaken by an earthquake?

On the envelope which she had made up into a parcel *with the bag* of gold her eye had been caught by these

words, written in pencil, "Given into my charge by my son Richard on the 6th of October."

The 6th of October was the day on which Mr. Hazeldine had been found on the floor of his office, stabbed to the heart !

CHAPTER XXXVI.

A JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY.

WHEN Hermia, in response to Mrs. Varrel's appeal, had said : "I will myself take the parcel to London," the answer had sprung to her lips of its own accord, so to speak, and as if her will had had no part in the framing of it.

It was a promise which, having once been given, she felt bound to fulfil ; but, indeed, after consideration showed her no reason why she should wish to do otherwise than fulfil it. She was determined, in the first place, to carry out her promise, and, in the second, if it were by any means possible to do so, to clear up the terrible suspicion which had taken root in her mind, either by proving that it had no basis of fact to rest upon, or else, by the accumulation of further evidence, to put together a case sufficiently strong to warrant her in placing it in other and more competent hands, leaving it for them to work out to whatever issue it might lead them.

In pursuance of this resolution it was that, two days after Mrs. Varrel's death, and without affording the faintest hint to anyone of the real object she had in view, Hermia wrote the note, already given, to her lover ; and after bidding Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte a tender farewell, set out for London on an errand which she herself felt all but convinced would prove to be nothing more than a bootless errand.

She drove direct from the London terminus to the house of her friend, Mrs. Wingate, in Maida Vale. Both Mrs. Wingate and her husband made Hermia as wel-

come as it was possible to make anyone. She explained to them the object of her journey as far as the delivery of the parcel was concerned, upon which Mr. Wingate kindly offered to keep her company on her errand, assuring her, after she had told him the address she wanted to go to, that the neighborhood in question was a very low one, being infested by loose characters of various kinds, and that a lady unattended—unless she were a Sister of Mercy, or a “visitor,” and known to be such—could scarcely traverse it without the risk of being insulted, to say nothing of the further risk she would run of being hustled and robbed.

On consideration, Hermia deemed it best to accept Mr. Wingate's offer. She had not mentioned Richard Varrell's name, and, bearing in mind her promise to his mother, she determined not to do so.

Accordingly, they set out about six o'clock the following day, Mr. Wingate being of opinion that if the person Miss Rivers was in search of were in any kind of employment she would be more likely to find him at home in the evening than at any other time. Mr Wingate had engaged a hansom, and after what had seemed to Hermia an interminable ride, but which was none the less strange and fascinating to her untutored eyes on that account, they were set down opposite a church having a spire so tall and stately that if it could have been transplanted to the flat country about Ashdown it would have served as a landmark for miles around. After skirting the churchyard and leaving behind all the main thoroughfares of traffic, they found themselves in a maze of streets, courts and alleys, the like of which Hermia had never dreamed of before and never wished to see again. The farther they penetrated, the more squalid and mean became their surroundings. The whole neighborhood swarmed with life—but such life ! Could Hermia ever forget the dream of baleful faces which passed like a procession before her that evening ; *some scowling and sinister, some leering, some with an*

ape-like grin upon them, and others verging on the vacancy of an idiot's, with here and there one bearing the impress of a wickedness so unfathomable that the girl could but shudder and veil her eyes? "But the children—oh, my dears, the little children!" as she said afterwards, when recounting her experience to Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte, her blue eyes flushed with tears. "It was simply heartrending to see them and to feel and know that I could do nothing for them."

At length, but not till after two or three inquiries on Mr. Wingate's part, Plumtree Street was found, number sixteen. It was a narrow street of three-storey tenements, all of them looking unspeakably squalid and uncared for, with broken windows stuffed with rags and paper, and in many cases with doors which hardly hung together on their hinges. Mr. Wingate now gave Hermia the parcel, which he had hitherto taken charge of, and while he waited on guard, as it were, on the corner of the street, Hermia made her way to number sixteen, and not without a little fluttering of the nerves, knocked at the door. Again and again she knocked, first with her knuckles and then with the handle of her umbrella—the knocker itself, if there had ever been one, having apparently been wrenched away long ago—but to no purpose, although she could hear a woman inside objurgating someone at the top of her voice. A swarm of children watched her every movement, and presently, as if by some preconcerted signal, windows were thrown up, and the doorways near at hand began to fill with the shapes of slatternly women, and frowsy, disreputable-looking men.

Hermia began to feel far from comfortable, and she was just considering whether she had not better go back to Mr. Wingate, when the door was suddenly opened from within, and she found herself face to face with Richard Varrel.

She knew him again at a glance, despite the woeful change which a few short years had wrought in him.

In days gone by, when he was a clerk, and she a girl of ten or twelve, she used often to meet him on her way to school, when he had always a smiling "Good-morning" for her. In those days he was a dandified, good-looking young man, with a facile smile, and the easy manner of one who was on excellent terms with himself and the world.

Hermia had not seen him after his "misfortune," as he termed it, till the evening of the trial when he spoke to John Brancker through the cab window, and even then she had been shocked to see the change in him ; but now, when she beheld him again, the change was still more marked. His hands trembled like aspen leaves, his eyes were bleared and bloodshot, his face sallow and fallen away to little more than skin and bone.

He stood staring at Hermia, holding the open door in his hand, with a sort of half-gleam of recognition in his furtively suspicious eyes.

"Mr. Varrel," she said, "I see that you fail to remember me. My name is Hermia Rivers, and I am the niece of Mr. Brancker, of Ashdown."

The moment she began to speak his face lighted up with what seemed like the ghost of his old pleasant smile.

"What a stupid I must be to have forgotten you even for a moment !" he exclaimed. "Why of course I remember you, Miss Hermia—remember you from the time you were no higher than a table. Do you know what I used to think in those days? But how should you? I used to think that when you grew up I should like to marry you. Ah, I did, and I was in earnest about it, too !"

This was not at all what Hermia wanted, so she made haste to say :

"Are you not curious, Mr. Varrel, to know why I have come all this way to find you? But, first of all,

why did you neglect to answer the letter I wrote you to this address more than a week ago?"

"Letter!—what letter?" he queried, with a half-mazed look, and with that he pushed back his hat and pressed his hands to his forehead for a few moments, as if trying to recall something to mind. Then, half-doubtingly, he thrust his hand into an inner pocket of his coat and drew from it a letter—the one Hermia had written him, as she saw at a glance, and still unopened. He stared at it for a space of a dozen seconds, and then he said, confusedly :

"I recollect, now, I put it in my pocket when it came—I wasn't very well at the time—and afterwards I forgot all about it. I did, upon my honor!"

"Open it and read it," was all Hermia could say.

When he had done so, he looked at her with a question in his eyes which his lips seemed afraid to ask.

"Your mother died three days ago," said Hermia, "looking to the last for the son who never came."

He turned away, and putting up an arm against the door-post, he leaned his head upon it. The tears that dropped from his eyes made tiny black dents in the grimy dust into which they fell.

"I've not one word of excuse, Miss Hermia, to urge for myself," he said presently. "I put the letter in my pocket, and forgot all about it. It was all owing to the drink—the cursed drink!"

Thereupon Hermia proceeded to give him his mother's last message.

"God bless her! She was a good woman," he said, sorrowfully. "Maybe, if I had been a different son to her she would have lived for years to come."

That he was genuinely moved by the news of his mother's death it was impossible to doubt.

"The errand which brought me here is not yet completed," said Hermia, presently. "Your mother entrusted me with a sum of money to give into your hands.

His cheek paled on the instant. "Hush! Not a word about it here," he whispered, with a quick, apprehensive glance around. "If the wretches hereabouts once suspected that I had anything more than the merest trifle in the way of money in my possession, I should be a dead man before to-morrow morning. Will you come into my room for three minutes, Miss Rivers? You may safely do so, and I won't detain you longer."

Mr. Wingate was still keeping watch and ward at the corner of the street. "Lead the way and I will follow," was all she said.

Accordingly, they entered the house, and after Varrel had shut the door behind them he led the way up a rickety staircase, the handrail of which had been torn away, into a small back room on the first floor. Never before had Hermia been in such a room; but the evening was drawing in by this time, and in the half light its more sordid features did not seem so obtrusive as they would have done at mid-day.

"Not a palace, truly, Miss Rivers," he said, with a shrug and a cynical smile, "but cheerful, homelike, nay, almost luxurious in comparison with some of its neighbors."

Hermia's only reply was an involuntary shudder.

Motioning her to the one chair in the place, he seated himself on the edge of a box, and cut the string of the parcel, which Hermia had handed him on entering the room. Before him lay the envelope and its contents, together with the bag of gold. He looked up, and his and Hermia's eyes met.

"This," he said, laying a finger on the envelope, "my mother was to keep for me until I should choose to reclaim it; but this," shifting his finger to the bag, "was for her sole use, as I told her when I gave it her—to buy whatever she wanted, and help to make her comfortable."

"Your mother refused to touch it, Mr. Varrel," replied Hermia, looking him steadily in the face.

"What do you mean?" he demanded, with startling suddenness. "Who told you she would not touch it?"

"She herself. She said there was blood on it—those were her words—and that she would have nothing to do with it till you had proved to her how you had come by it."

He sat for some seconds without speaking or stirring, like one in doubt what to do or say next. Then he said, sneeringly :

"Old people when they lie dying often get strange fancies into their heads, and give expression to all manner of ridiculous things. Sensible people take no heed of their ravings at such times."

"On the contrary, it is at such times that secrets long hidden come unexpectedly to light."

He bit his lip as if to restrain himself from saying something which he might afterwards have regretted. Having glanced at the seal, he was about to put the envelope into his pocket unopened, when Hermia said :

"Mr. Varrel, have you noticed what is written outside that packet?"

"No—what is it?" he demanded.

In the twilight he had overlooked the writing. He now crossed to the window and read it. Then for a little space he stood stock still, with eyes that seemed fixed on vacancy. Then, going back to his seat, he said dryly :

"My mother's writing, without a doubt, Miss Rivers. But it was scarcely worth while—was it?—to draw my attention specially to it."

"You are quite aware of my motive in drawing your attention to it," responded Hermia. "Those words were written within twenty-four hours of the time Mr. Hazeldine was found murdered."

He put down the packet with a sudden movement, as if it had scorched his fingers.

"Oh, Mr. Varrel !" cried the girl, clasping her hands in front of her bosom, as if thereby to enforce her appeal, "if you know anything whatever in connection with that terrible crime—if you have any clue, even the faintest, to the perpetrator of it—I implore you no longer to conceal it."

Varrel got up abruptly, and, crossing to the window, stood staring out of it with his back towards her. Hermia waited till the silence became all but unbearable.

"I am quite at a loss, Miss Rivers," he began at length, speaking in a hard, dry voice, "to know why you should address so singular an appeal to me, or assume that I know anything more about Mr. Hazeldine's tragical end than is known to the world at large. A certain remark made by an old woman—a certain coincidence of date in connection with a parcel of bank-notes—such is the flimsy superstructure round which you choose to build an imaginary theory, and then appeal to me for facts to enable you to substantiate it. No, Miss Rivers, it won't do. Your house of cards has no foundation beyond that which is supplied by your own vivid imagination. Pray accept my assurance on that score. The way in which the money, both gold and notes, came into my mother's hands is easily explained. I had won it over a certain race a few days before. The gold, as I have already remarked, I gave to her for her own use. That she did not choose to benefit by it is no fault of mine. The notes, which were intended by me for a very special purpose, I asked her to take charge of till the time should come for me to reclaim them, knowing well, as I did, that if I kept them by me, they would inevitably disappear after the fashion in which so many of their kind had disappeared already. The explanation is a simple one. I trust that you are satisfied."

He had come back to the table while speaking. Tearing open the envelope with an air of manifest defiance, he extracted the notes from it, and proceeded to stuff them unceremoniously into his pocket.

But Hermia was far from being satisfied. She felt instinctively that he was prevaricating, and that he knew far more than he cared to tell. But, in face of his emphatic denial, what was it possible for her to do more than she had done already? His manner implied that, as far as he was concerned, the interview was at an end, and, indeed, Hermia felt that it was high time for her to go. There was upon her a sense of hopeless bewilderment as she rose and pushed back her chair. She was like one groping in the mazes of a dark cavern, who, while feeling sure the daylight is close at hand, vainly strives to find the way which will lead him to it. She would have to go back to Ashdown no wiser than she had left it.

"Before you go, Miss Rivers," said Varrel, "permit me to thank you, which I do from the bottom of my heart, for all your kindness to my poor mother."

He added a little more in the same strain, which it is not needful to repeat.

Three minutes later Hermia had rejoined Mr. Wingate.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HOW AND WHY.

HAD it not been for the pressure put upon her by Mr. and Mrs. Wingate, Hermia would have returned to Ashdown by an early train next day, so disheartened was she by the result of her interview with Richard Varrel. In deference, however, to the wishes of her friends, she agreed to extend her stay for three days longer. She had quite made up her mind that she had seen the last of Varrel; that his path and hers would never cross each

other again. Yet all the while an indefinable sense of something still to come held her in her own despite. It could hardly be called a premonition, so shadowy and elusive was it, and yet it so impressed her that she could not hear a knock at the door without holding her breath to listen for a summons, for which her reason told her she might wait till the last day of her life, and always might be in vain.

However, strangely enough, the summons did come, and that just forty-eight hours after she had parted from Varrel. Before leaving him she had laid a card on the table. "Here is my address, in case you should at any time be desirous of communicating with me," she had said.

His only answer had been a cynical smile.

Having no cards of her own, she had pencilled her Ashdown address on the back of one of Mrs. Wingate's cards, which had that lady's address on the other side, and it was there the messenger came in search of her. A man of the name of Richard Varrel, who was lying in St. Gregory's Hospital in a very critical state, earnestly entreated that Miss Rivers would go to him with the least possible delay, as he had something of extreme importance to communicate to her. Such was the message that now reached Hermia.

A cab was at once ordered, and ten minutes later she was on her way to the Hospital, accompanied, as before, by Mr. Wingate.

Before being admitted to the ward Hermia was shown into an ante-room, where she was presently joined by a middle-aged, ladylike person, with a strong yet kindly face, dressed in the usual Hospital uniform, whose name she afterwards found to be Miss Davis. From her Hermia learned that in the course of the preceding night Varrel had been brought in by the police, unconscious and apparently in a dying state. His story when he came to himself, was to the effect that while *on his way* to his lodgings he had been set upon by three

men, who had somehow discovered that he had a considerable sum of money about him, and that in the fight which ensued he had not only been robbed, but stabbed in three places. His case was an utterly hopeless one, Miss Davis went on to say; he might possibly linger for two or three days, but should internal hemorrhage set in the end would come still more quickly. Then she went on to ask whether Hermia was a relative of the dying man, and on receiving a reply in the negative, requested her to make her interview as brief as possible, and especially to avoid all topics which would be likely in any way to excite the patient. After that she led the way into the ward, while Mr. Wingate awaited Hermia's return in the ante-room.

Varrel's eyes lighted up the moment they rested on Hermia. His face was the face of one on the verge of the last great change, and the girl could not keep back her tears. She sat down by the side of his pallet, after which one of the attendants placed a large screen round them, so as to shut them in from the other patients.

"You didn't think to see me so soon again, Miss Hermia, I'll be bound—nor I you!" began Varrel, with a dim smile, but speaking more clearly and strongly than Hermia would have thought possible for one in his condition. "However, here I am, and there's no help for it. It was the money that was the cause of it—the money you brought me. A sort of Nemesis. They—the men my life has been mixed up with of late—found out somehow I had it about me. The wonder is they left any life in me at all. But it's not for long. I know that I'm booked for the journey for which no return tickets are issued. Well, I'm not sorry—on my soul, I'm not!—that the end has come. But it was to talk about something very different that I sent for you, for since I've been lying here, I've made up my mind to tell all I know."

He ceased, and lay for a little while with shut eyes. *When he opened them it was seemingly to fix them on*

a flickering shadow flung by the lamplight on the ceiling. Suddenly a hollow voice spoke,

"Miss Hermia, it was not John Brancker, but the man you see before you, who killed Mr. Hazeldine."

Hermia's heart gave a great bound, and she caught her breath with a gasp like a drowning person. It seemed to her as if an ice-cold wind blew for a minute across her face. She shuddered, and involuntarily drew a little farther away from the dying man.

"I haven't strength enough left me to go into a lot of details, resumed Varrel, after a pause, "but if I'm not hurried, I think it will last out till I've told you enough to make the whole business clear, and—and to lift the last shadow-of suspicion off John Brancker."

Again he lapsed into silence, and to Hermia it seemed as if he were struggling against some inward force which would fain have compelled him, even at this the eleventh hour, to carry his secret unrevealed to the grave. She waited in a sort of dread expectancy and with nerves all a-tremble for his next words.

The statement which follows, although given here in unbroken sequence, was several times interrupted by a fit of coughing, or by a labored gasping for breath. More than once, in obedience to his request, Hermia gave him to drink of a jug of barley-water which stood within reach of his hand.

"Yes, mine alone is the guilt. I wanted money; I was desperately hard up, and I made up my mind to rob the Bank, if it was possible anyhow to do so. I knew that Thursday night, when the gold had been fetched from London to pay away to market-day customers, was the best time for my purpose. I was acquainted with all the ins and outs of the place, and it was a simple matter for me to push open the swing doors and steal unseen into the building when the day's business was nearly over. Then up the spiral staircase and so into the book-room, where snugly hidden in an empty cupboard, *I was safe from observation until the time should have*

come for me to take my next step, which was to make my way to Mr. Avison's office—he was abroad, and I knew that it was never used during his absence—there to bide my time. To reach it I should have to pass through Mr. Hazeldine's office, the door which led into it from the lobby being kept locked. I was aware that for several weeks past Mr. Hazeldine had been in the habit of working till a late hour, and I calculated that he would most likely do so on this particular night. Earlier in the day I had watched him start for London, and I knew that when he returned he would bring with him the gold he had been there to fetch.

"I waited where I was until the general staff had gone for the night, but I knew that Mr. Brancker and Mr. Judd often worked after hours, and it seemed not unlikely that they might still be on the premises. It was absolutely necessary, however, that I should make my way to Mr. Avison's office before Mr. Hazeldine's return ; and this, after a time, I succeeded in doing without being seen by anyone. As I crept down the spiral staircase I could hear the murmur of voices in Mr. Brancker's office. I had not been long in my second hiding-place, before I heard the well-remembered voice of Mr. Hazeldine as he spoke with Obed Sweet in the passage. Then he entered his office and turned up the gas, which had been previously lighted by Sweet ; I had left the door between the two rooms open about an inch, and through the interstice a portion of the office was visible to me, including the iron door which gave admittance to the strong room.

"The first thing Mr. Hazeldine did was to place his black bag, containing the gold he had brought from London, on a chair, then he took off his hat and overcoat, and hung them up ; and then, presumably, he seated himself at the table where he worked, but when so seated, he was out of my line of vision, and on no account durst I open the door even as much as an inch further. Presently he rose, and having unlocked the

door of the strong-room, went inside. Here was the opportunity I had been waiting for, which was neither more nor less than to make a dash from my hiding-place, push to and lock the iron door, with Mr. Hazeldine on the other side of it, and then make off with the black bag and its contents. But now the chance was here I was afraid to take advantage of it. In the passage outside I heard Obed Sweet's wheezy cough, and as far as I knew, both Mr. Brancker and Mr. Judd were still at work in the other office. There was nothing for it but to await a more favorable opportunity.

"In a minute or two Mr. Hazeldine went back to his seat, leaving the door of the strong-room wide open. Presently the sound of Obed's voice reached me from the corridor. Evidently there was someone still at work. I could only grind my teeth and wait.

"After what, alone and in the dark, seemed to me an intolerable time—but which may have been a few minutes only, or may have been an hour—I heard the reverberation of the front door. There could no longer be any doubt that Mr. Hazeldine was now the only official, save Sweet, left in the building. At last my opportunity seemed at hand.

"Still I waited, hoping minute by minute that Mr. Hazeldine would again find it necessary to enter the strong room. As I remarked before, I could not see him, but more than once I heard him groan like a man in pain. The black bag still remained where he had put it on coming in. Then, after a time, to my intense surprise, I again heard the muffled clash of the front door. I could not make it out at all, neither, apparently, could Sweet, who presently came blundering into the office without his customary knock, clearly under the impression that it was Mr. Hazeldine who had just gone, and finely disconcerted he was on discovering his mistake. 'I shall be about half-an-hour yet, Sweet, and will let myself out when I'm ready,' said Mr. Hazeldine ; whereupon Sweet made his exit.

"St. Mary's clock had just chimed the half-hour past ten, Mr. Hazeldine would leave the office about eleven, the London train by which I hoped to get away with my booty was due at a quarter past that hour : what I had to do must be done within the next thirty minutes, or not at all. I said to myself : 'I will wait till St. Mary's chimes the quarter to eleven, on the chance of Mr. Hazeldine again going into the strong-room, when I will spring out and shut him in. If the chance does not come by then, I will present myself before him, revolver in hand, and compel him on pain of instant death to do my bidding. When once he is shut up in the strong-room the rest will be easy. He may shout himself hoarse, but Sweet below stairs will hear nothing till he comes on his next round, by which time I and the black bag will be far away.' It is to be borne in mind that I hated Mr. Hazeldine as I hated no other man in the world. He it was who at my trial had no word of mercy to urge in my favor ; to him, in a great measure, was due my sentence of penal servitude. But, for all that, I swear I had no more thought or intention of taking his life than I had of taking my own.

"Chance favored me at the last moment, or seemed to do so. After a time Mr. Hazeldine rose, and went once more into the strong-room. Not a moment did I hesitate. Pushing open the door, behind which I had been in hiding, I sprang out into the lighted office, and made a dash for the iron door, but midway on the floor lay a pile of ledgers over which, in my hurry, I stumbled and fell. Before I could recover myself Mr. Hazeldine was upon me, and when I struggled to my feet it was with his clutch at my throat. The instant the light fell on my face he recognized me. 'Richard Varrel !' he exclaimed, as he let go his hold, and fell back a step or two in sheer amazement. A second later I had whipped out my revolver, which, however, was not loaded—but of course he didn't know that. 'Mr. Hazel-

dine,' I said, 'thanks to you, I'm a desperate man. I want the money in that bag, and, at whatever cost, I'm determined to have it. So, if you value your life ——' But at that moment he made a quick stride forward, and knocked the revolver out of my hand, and before I could recover it he had sprung at me with a long-bladed knife, which he snatched off the table, but for what purpose it happened to be there I cannot even guess. His eyes were as the eyes of a madman ; never have I seen such an expression on the face of anyone. On the instant I closed with him, and then began a life-and-death struggle, he trying to stab me, and I trying to wrench the knife from his grasp. How it all happened I shall never know, but his foot slipped, and as he fell he dragged me to the ground with him, and all at once I found the knife in my hand. He struggled desperately to recover himself, then—my God !—somehow the knife —— "

Varrel had been growing weaker for several minutes past, his utterance more hollow, his breath more labored, and as the last word dropped from his lips he fainted.

Hermia at once summoned the nurse, who in her turn summoned Miss Davis. Restoratives were applied, and in a little while their patient came round. Hermia was on the point of taking her leave, with the intention of calling again on the morrow ; but Varrel motioned that he had something to say to her. He could only speak in a whisper, and Hermia had to bend her ear close to him in order to catch what he said.

"Write down what I have told you—now—at once," he gasped, "and I will sign it."

So, after a few explanatory words to Miss Davis, Hermia rejoined Mr. Wingate in the ante-room, and told him as briefly as possible the particulars she wanted him to set down. Pen, ink, and paper were at hand, and it did not take him long to draw up a short document, in which Varrel acknowledged that to him,

and him alone, was due the death of Mr. Hazeldine. When it was finished, Hermia went back to the ward, accompanied by Mr. Wingate. The statement was read over to Varrel, who nodded his head in approval of it. Then he was propped up in bed to enable him to sign it, after which Mr. Wingate and Miss Davis appended their signatures to the paper as witnesses.

Hermia did not see Richard Varrel again. At day-break next morning he died.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE CLOUD DISPERSED, AND A BITTER DISAPPOINTMENT.

It was on the afternoon of the fifth day after leaving home that Hermia alighted from the London train at Ashdown station. Clement was there to meet her. She had written a few lines daily both to him and to Aunt Charlotte, just enough to allay their anxiety and nothing more.

When the train had gone on its way and the platform was clear of people, Clement drew her into the little waiting-room, which at that hour they had all to themselves. He had already given John and Miss Brancker all particulars in connection with his second visit to Stavinger, and it seemed to him that the present would be a capital opportunity for doing the same by Hermia. Accordingly, he proceeded to tell her all about his interview with Barney Dale, and how it had resulted in a promise on his part that Hermia should go to Stavinger as soon as possible, when an opportunity would be found by the old servitor for introducing her to Miss Pengarvon. Of that which the girl's heart hungered most to know—whether one or both of her parents were still alive—Clement could tell her nothing.

When he had brought his narrative to an end, Hermia cried a little softly to herself. Why she did so she could not have told anyone, but at her age so curiously

are the emotions intermingled, and so close akin does joy seem to sorrow, that both alike find their readiest outlet in tears.

Presently Clement said,

"And now, darling, have you nothing to tell me in return? All of us, your uncle and aunt equally with myself, have been on the tenterhooks of suspense ever since you left home with such mysterious suddenness. I hope we may congratulate you on having achieved the object of your journey, whatever it may have been."

"You may, indeed you may," she exclaimed, turning on him an April-day face in which smiles and tears were exquisitely blended. "I have succeeded beyond my wildest hopes. I have much, very much to tell you—a surprise in store for you all such as none of you dreams of. But Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte must be there when I relate my adventures, such as they are, because, you see, dear, what I have to tell concerns them equally with yourself, and I want one telling to be enough for everybody. So, not a word more about it till evening."

They parted at the gate of Nairn Cottage. Clem, who was in a state of utter mystification, was to return at half-past seven.

At that hour they were all assembled—John, his sister, Hermia, and Clement, in the little sitting-room at the Cottage.

There to her wondering listeners did Hermia her tale unfold.

Over the congratulations and felicitations that were exchanged between one and another of them, when at length she had come to the end of her recital, it needs not that we should linger. The dark cloud, in the shadow of which they had dwelt for so long a time, had lifted at last and vanished into thinnest air. Their mood, however, was less one of jubilation than of *reverent thankfulness*. If Hermia had not been dear to

Clement before, that night would not have failed to make her so. But, indeed, it was not possible for him to love her more than he did already.

"It seems a thousand pities," said John Brancker, who for some minutes had been lost in thought, "that Richard Varrel should have gone to his grave without having had his mind disabused of the belief that he owed it to Mr. Hazeldine, and not to Mr. Avison himself, that he was brought to trial and the charge against him pressed sternly home. In point of fact, Mr. Hazeldine did everything that lay in his power with the view of extenuating Varrel's crime; but Mr. Avison's orders in the matter were imperative, and he had no option but to carry them out. Had Varrel but known this at the time many things might perhaps have fallen out differently; but of course it was nobody's business to enlighten him, and to his hand was due the death of the man who had done his utmost to befriend him."

"There are two points," said Clem, presently, "which I should certainly like to be enlightened upon. In the first place, I should like to know the sum total pocketed by Varrel as the proceeds of his crime; and, in the second, what his object was in entrusting the parcel of notes to his mother's keeping.

"Those were two points as to which Mr. Wingate was equally curious with yourself," replied Hermia, "and he did not fail to question Varrel upon them during the few minutes we were allowed to stay with him after he had signed the confession. As soon as Varrel had realized that Mr. Hazeldine was dead, it was only natural that he should be desirous of getting away from the scene of his crime as speedily as possible. He must seize whatever he could lay hands on at once and decamp. To his intense amazement, the black bag in which he expected to find the gold Mr. Hazeldine was supposed to have brought from London, proved to be empty. All that his hurried search enabled him to lay hands on was a bag containing a hundred sovereigns

and a parcel of notes of the value of five hundred pounds. The gold he divided with his mother before setting out for London ; but Mrs. Varrel, as we have seen, refused to touch her portion of it. The notes he left in her charge because he felt sure their numbers were known, and that any attempt on his part to change them would simply have led to his arrest."

Late as the hour was when Clement Hazeldine left Nairn Cottage, he felt that he could not sleep until he had seen his brother and told him the news. A brisk walk of half-an-hour brought him to Beecham.

He found Edward sitting in slippered ease over a volume of Montesquieu—as one who hoped some day to help in framing the laws of his country—and a cigar. Ten minutes sufficed him to give his brother the pith of Hermia's narrative. He had brought Varrel's confession, and he finished his recital by producing it and handing it to the other.

Never was a man more astounded than Edward Hazeldine was at the news told him by his brother. To think, to realize as a fact that, after all, his father's death was not due to his own act ! It seemed almost too incredible to be true. Of course, the fact remained, and could in no wise be gainsaid, that Mr. Hazeldine had fully intended to take his own life, and would undoubtedly have done so had not fate intervened and brought about the same end after a different fashion ; but even so, the relief to Edward Hazeldine was more than he could find words to give expression to. It took him some time to recover himself ; the cool, almost frigid, self-possession which was one of his most salient attributes had for the time being deserted him. One of his first remarks, after his wonder had in some measure spent itself, was,

"Thank Heaven ! there will now be no need to refund the twelve thousand pounds—for, of course, the confession will have to be made public." Then presently he added, "Do you mean to say, Clem, that this

fellow Varrel made no allusion to the fact that the large amount of money which was proved to be missing from the Bank's coffers had not been taken by him?"

"It would certainly seem that he did not. As I have already told you, he fainted before having come to the end of what he had evidently intended to say, and he died a few hours later. What further revelations he would have made had he lived a little while longer, it is now, of course, impossible to say."

"A lucky thing for us he died when he did!" said Edward, more to himself than to his brother. "The world will not fail to saddle him with the double crime."

As the brothers shook hands at parting, by which time it was past midnight, Edward said:

"By the way, Clem, that girl of yours must be one in a thousand. I hereby retract every word in her disparagement that I have ever given utterance to. I shall be proud to be introduced to her." Then more earnestly, and with what for him was an unwonted display of feeling: "In such a business as we have been discussing it is only a part of the selfishness of human nature that we should think of ourselves first, but I hope you'll believe me when I say that not the least portion of the happiness your news has caused me is due to the fact that the last shred of suspicion, which for so long a time has clung to that noble-hearted creature, John Brancker, will now be torn away, and his good name be given back to him as pure and unsullied as, in reality, it has been from the first!"

In the course of the following afternoon, Miss Brancker, Hermia, and Clement arrived at Stavering, and, under the guidance of the latter, proceeded to take up their quarters at the "King's Arms" Hotel.

A few hours later, Clement walked over to the "Chequers Inn," at Dritton, in search of Barney Dale, whom he found seated among his cronies in his usual corner. Drawing the old man aside, Clement said,

"Miss Hermia Rivers is in Stavinger—at the 'King's Arms' Hotel. How soon can you make it convenient to call and see her?"

"And have you brought her—the bonnie darling?" exclaimed Barney. "Well, well, I suppose I must do what I promised. But the mistress grows queerer every day, and what the upshot will be when I bring 'em together, I canna as much as guess. But I'll be there to-morrow some time in the afternoon, and maybe—but I mun think it all over between now and then;" and with that Barney went back to his pipe and tankard of ale.

Next morning Clement hired a conveyance, and drove Aunt Charlotte and Hermia as far as the park entrance to Broome, where they all alighted. Everything remained as when Clement had been there last. Leading the way through the door in the wall, he brought the ladies to where the mutilated griffin, which he had sketched, lay unheeded among the weeds and grass. Hermia sighed as she looked at it.

"How vividly the sight of it brings back that wet and gloomy afternoon," she said, "when the carriage came to a halt at those very gates, and I sat staring out of the window, more tired than curious. So tired out, indeed, was I, that I felt utterly indifferent as to where I was being taken, or what was going to be done with me. It seems to me, however, that I have to thank the old griffin for a good deal. But for it we might not have been here to-day."

After that they strolled along the grass-grown drive as far as a point whence they could obtain a view of the front of the Hall. Clem, on whose arm Hermia was leaning, felt her shiver involuntarily.

"It gives me quite an eeire feeling to look at it, even by broad daylight," she said. "What it must look like when the shades of evening are closing round it, or by the dim light of a clouded moon, I dare scarcely

imagine. I shall dream about it more than once in time to come."

"Were I a story writer, and wanted to describe a haunted house, I should come to Broome," remarked Aunt Charlotte, sententiously.

She also felt the influence of the place and scene.

"It is a sort of feeling that would wear off upon further acquaintance," said Clem. "If, now, one could give a free hand to a London upholsterer, not forgetting the landscape-gardener, and if after they had done their best, one could fill the old house with a party of gay young people, with the addition of half-a-dozen romping children, what a transformation should we behold!"

Hermia shook her head.

"Broome as it appeals to the imagination, but Broome as Clem would have it would be ——"

"As commonplace as himself," interrupted the latter, with a laugh. "That was a spot of rain, we had better be getting back to the landau."

Barney Dale reached the hotel about half-past five, and Clem, who was on the look-out for him, at once took him into the sitting-room where Hermia was awaiting his arrival. Then he left them together. Hermia advanced with a blush and a smile, and yet with a strange trembling of her limbs, and held out her hand.

"I cannot express to you how happy it makes me to see you again, Mr. Dale," she said, in soft, emotional tones, which fell like music on the old man's ears.

"Again! How again?" he asked, as he peered closely into her face. "When might you have seen me last, missy?" Then half-aloud, but evidently thinking himself unheard, "The likeness! the likeness! The same eyes and hair—the very marrow of the other!"

"As far as my memory serves, I saw you last on the day you brought me to Broome," answered Hermia. "I had a long, long ride in a carriage with you and some-

one else—a woman. But come, let us sit, and then we can talk more comfortably."

He loosed the hand he had been holding, and let her lead him to a sofa, where they sat down, side by side.

"Then a little later," resumed Hermia, "I can call to mind being in a room—a very gloomy room—in which sat two ladies, very stately and upright, but, to my childish eyes, very, very awful-looking. I stood before them with my hands behind my back, while they talked to each other about me in French or Italian. Then, after a little while, you came into the room carrying two candlesticks, with lighted candles in them, on a silver tray, whereupon Miss Pengarvon—for she it must have been—at once extinguished one of the candles, after which you were bidden to take me away. I have a good memory, have I not, Mr. Dale?"

Barney's eyes were fixed intently on her face as if he were still tracing, feature by feature, the likeness between it and some other face which dwelt in his memory. He did not heed her question. His lips moved, but no sound came from them; he was talking silently to himself.

"And now, Mr. Dale," resumed Hermia, presently, "I want you to tell me what the relationship is between Miss Pengarvon and myself—for that we are related in some way I feel as sure as that I am sitting here."

"You munna ask me, Miss Hermy," answered the old man with a long, slow shake of his head. "I darena answer any questions. My mistress bound me by an oath not to speak a word to a soul about—about the matter that is between her and me till she gives me leave to do so."

Hermia drew a little nearer to him, and took one of his gnarled and withered hands between her soft palms.

"At least you cannot refuse to tell me this," she said, her blue eyes luminous with a sort of yearning pathos. "You cannot refuse to tell me whether my father and mother are still living?"

Then, as the old man did not answer :

"Think, think what it must be not to know even as much as that," she added pleadingly. "In so far, I am worse off—Heaven help me!—than the meanest beggar's child that tramps the streets."

"Let the mistress blame me, I dunna care. She shall be told," muttered Barney, half-aloud. Then he cleared his voice, and squeezing one of the little hands that held his, he said, "My bonnie darling, I never knew your father—never even heard his name, and canna tell you aught about him. But your mother—ah! Your mother!" He paused, and Hermia saw a tear shining in the corner of either eye.

"Yes—what of her?" she asked, with a catching of her breath, for her heart but too truly presaged what she was about to be told.

"She died a few weeks after you were born."

Hermia dropped the old man's hand, and turning, bowed her head and covered her face with her hands. Silently she wept; Barney's tears brimmed over and trickled down his worn cheeks. In a little while he wiped them away with his cotton handkerchief, and rising, went softly out of the room. He found Clement outside. "Go in and comfort the poor child," he said. "She needs it sorely, and your own heart will teach you how best to do it."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

AN INTERVIEW AND ITS SEQUEL.

EVENING was beginning to close in—the evening of the day following that of the interview between Barney Dale and Hermia—when the latter, accompanied by Aunt Charlotte and Clement, alighted from a fly at the gates by the ruined lodge, and walked through the park to Broome, where they were admitted by Barney at the *side entrance*. It had been deemed best by the old

man that Hermia should be introduced to Miss Pengarvon when he took in the lighted candles, which of itself made a little interruption, sufficing to break the current of his mistress's sombre meditations and bringing her back, if only for a few minutes, to a sense of time and place.

Since the fit, or seizure, of which Barney had made mention to Clement, although to all seeming she was now as well bodily as she had previously been, her nervous system had become even more acutely irritable than before her attack. She seemed to live almost entirely in the past, and to talk more and more with the shadows that kept her company in the Green Parlor—Sir Jasper, Lady Pengarvon, Miss Letitia, and Isabel, with others whom Barney was unable to identify with anyone whom he had known.

Barney trembled inwardly for the result of the experiment he was about to venture upon, but having once given his promise, he was determined to abide by it, come what might.

So, when the proper moment had come, Barney, carrying the stately silver candlesticks, opened the door of the Green Parlor and went in, followed by Hermia, who was bareheaded and dressed with quaker-like simplicity, in a gown of some softly-clinging grey material. Even the two candles scarcely sufficed to dissipate the shadows which seemed to have their natural gathering-place in the gloomy old room ; but when Miss Pengarvon proceeded to extinguish one of them, which she did at once, a number of the shadows came trooping back on the instant, as though they had known beforehand what she would do, and were only waiting for it. Hermia could readily have fancied that the intervening years were nothing but a dream, and that she was standing there again, a three-year-old mite, with her hands behind her, only she had then been confronted by two stern-faced ladies, whereas now there was only one. But there, close to the table, in the place where it

had stood when she was alive, was the empty chair of the dead and gone Miss Pengarvon—she who had crept into Hermy's room at midnight and had kissed her in her sleep.

Despite the changes which eighteen years had brought about, Hermia knew Miss Pengarvon at once. The chilly, unsympathetic, blue-grey eyes, and the heavy brows were there as of old, but the once dark locks were now nearly snow white, and although her face had always been long and thin, the bones now stood out with startling prominence, with the shrunken, yellow-ivory skin stretched tightly over them. But in the steel-cold eyes there now shone something which caused Hermia's heart to beat faster even than it had beat on entering the room. It was the gleam of incipient insanity which she saw there, although she knew it not.

Notwithstanding the warmth of the weather, a few embers were burning in the grate, and it was not till Barney moved aside and proceeded to rake them together that Miss Pengarvon's eyes fell on Hermia. Not even by as much as the flicker of an eyelid did she evince the slightest surprise at sight of the girl.

"So you have come at last," she said, speaking in the hard, measured tones of an icy displeasure. "How many times have I had to tell you of late that I will not have you wandering in the park at this late hour of the afternoon? You see, Letitia, how utterly unbiddable the girl is." Here she was evidently addressing the unseen occupant of the vacant chair. "You choose to plead for her, and to urge this and that in her favor, although I have told you over and over again that Isabel's is one of those disobedient and ungrateful dispositions on which kindness is absolutely thrown away." Then, turning to Hermia, she added, frowningly, "I have nothing more to say to you. Go to your room, and stay there till I give you permission to leave it."

Who was the Isabel for whom Miss Pengarvon evi-

dently mistook her? Hermia could not help asking herself; could it be her mother?

But it was not a time to ask questions. Advancing a step or two she said, "My name is not Isabel, Miss Pengarvon. I am Hermia Rivers. Do you not remember seeing me here when I was a little girl?"

"Hermia Rivers!" echoed Miss Pengarvon, in a whisper loud enough for the others to hear, as a person at the moment of waking might repeat with a kind of frightened surprise some name which, spoken in his ear, had been enough to break his sleep. "And who, pray, may Hermia Rivers be?" she demanded next moment, as she rose slowly and not without difficulty from her chair and drew herself up to her full height. "No such person is known to me." Then, turning abruptly on the trembling Barney, she said, "How many times have I given you my orders that, on no pretence whatever, should you introduce any one into my presence without having first obtained my permission to do so? Take this young woman away at once—at once, I say—and never let me see her face again! She is an intruder. I know her not!" With an imperious gesture she pointed to the door. The old man beckoned sorrowfully to Hermia, and the two left the room without a word more.

Barney's experiment had resulted in failure; but for that the old man was in no way to blame. He had done his best to bring about an explanation between Miss Pengarvon and her niece, and that he had not succeeded was no fault of his. Saddened and disheartened, our trio went back to Staving.

Not knowing at what hour they should be back, they had left the question of dinner till their return, and they now separated, pending its preparation. As Hermia passed up the staircase on her way to her room, she encountered a middle-aged, military-looking man, with a grey mustache, who happened to be coming down at the same moment. The lamp at the head of

the staircase shone full on Hermia, and as they passed each other the stranger, whose eyes had been fixed on her face, gave a palpable start, and at the same instant made a clutch at the balusters as if to keep himself from falling. Then he turned and gazed after Hermia's retreating figure ; and then, instead of keeping on his way down stairs, he re-ascended them and went back to his room with the air of a man who was at once puzzled and disturbed in his mind. He was none other than Major Strickland. He who, but a month or two before, had met with such a decided rebuff at the hands of Miss Pengarvon. He had come down to Stavinger again in the hope that Miss Pengarvon, who in the meantime would have had ample time to think over and review certain particulars, which he had then laid before her, might now see fit to accord him the information she had then refused him, which, so far as he could judge, it would be hopeless for him to seek elsewhere.

Accordingly, on the morning of the day when we meet him for the second time, the Major had again walked over to Broome and had sent in his card by the hand of Barney Dale, whom he now saw for the first time. It had been brought back to him two minutes later, torn in half by Miss Pengarvon, who refused absolutely to see him, and ordered Barney to shut the door in his face—an order, however, which the latter chose to interpret in his own way. Then had the Major returned to Stavinger, disheartened and sad at heart, even as, a few hours later, three other persons had come back from Broome.

On returning to his room after being so startled by the vision he had encountered on the stairs, Major Strickland opened his portmanteau and took from it a miniature painted on ivory, in an oval case. Opening it, he gazed long and earnestly at the likeness inside, which was that of a very beautiful young woman, *apparently not more than about twenty years of age.*

"The resemblance is certainly most extraordinary," he soliloquized aloud. "But for the changed fashion of dress and the different arrangement of the hair, it seems to me that each of them might sit for the other's portrait. Who can she be? Gruding may be able to tell me something about her. I will seek him at once."

"The name of the young lady is Miss Hermia Rivers—at least, that's the name entered in the register," said the landlord, when found and questioned by the Major ten minutes later. "But you are ill, sir. What can I get you? What can I do for you?"

"It is nothing—nothing at all. I shall be better in a minute or two." Then to himself he added: "It is she—it must be she! The name alone is enough to prove it. How strange and unaccountable are the ways of Providence!" He seemed lost in thought for a few moments, then rousing himself, he said: "From the fact that Miss Rivers is staying under your roof, I presume that, like myself, she is only a visitor here?"

"That is all, sir. They arrived yesterday—the three of them—though the young gentleman was here before, about a fortnight since."

"I have no wish to be thought inquisitive," resumed the Major, "but I must confess that I am extremely desirous of ascertaining the nature of the business which has brought Miss Rivers to Staving. My motive is a very different one from idle curiosity."

"Well, sir, as far as I can make out," answered Gruding, "the business of the party seems to be much of a muchness with that of yourself, if you'll excuse my saying so."

"As how?" demanded the Major, quickly.

"Why, sir, they only arrived yesterday afternoon, and yet they have been twice to Broome already, and when the young gentleman—Doctor Hazeldine is his name—was here before, he had no end of questions to ask me about Miss Pengarvon; just like yourself, sir."

"A proof the more, had any been needed," said the

Major, under his breath. Then, after a minute's thought, he added aloud: "I must see Miss Rivers this evening. Find out, if you can, when the best time will be for me to ask for an interview."

"They were rather late in getting back from Broome and have not yet dined," said Gruding. "Suppose I send you word, sir, when dinner is over and the things cleared away."

"Do so," replied the Major; and with that he rose and went back to his room.

The Major had not been gone more than three or four minutes when Gruding was buttonholed by Doctor Hazeldine.

Hermia, while on their way back from Broome, had not failed to recount to Aunt Charlotte and Clem how Miss Pengarvon had addressed her by the name of Isabel, evidently mistaking her for someone else. This fact had greatly impressed Clem. Who was the unknown Isabel to whom Hermia bore a likeness so striking as to cause Miss Pengarvon to mistake one for the other? It was with a view of solving this question that he now sought the landlord.

"Mr. Gruding," he began, "when I was here last you were able to tell me a great deal about Broome and the Pengarvon family. Do you happen to know, or have you ever heard, of any member of the family in question whose name was Isabel?"

"Why, to be sure, sir. Miss Isabel was the present Miss Pengarvon's youngest sister by the late Sir Jasper's second wife. She ran away from Broome some twenty-one or two years ago, with a young gentleman as had been staying at this house for a couple of months or more, fishing and sketching, and such like. It was in everybody's mouth at the time, I can tell you, sir."

"And what became of Miss Isabel afterwards?"

"That's more than anybody seems to know, sir, unless it's Miss Pengarvon herself. Anyhow, she was never heard of in these parts again, as far as I know."

"And what was the name of the young gentleman?"

"Ah, now you puzzle me, sir. I've been trying of late to bring it to mind, but, for the life of me, I can't. You see, sir, it's such a long time ago; and one's memory, as one gets on in life, ain't as ready as it used to be."

Here was food for thought! Dinner was announced a few minutes later, and Clement decided that, for the present, he would keep what Gruding had just told him to himself.

It was a balmy evening in early summer. The room in which dinner had been served overlooked a bowling-green at the back of the hotel, set round with borders of old-fashioned flowers. A faint shimmer of moonlight lay over everything. Clem was smoking on the balcony; Miss Brancker and Hermia were seated by the window. A shaded lamp stood on a centre table. There was a tap at the door, and in came the waiter carrying a card on a salver, which he presented to Miss Rivers with one of his most deferential bows. Hermia took it with a little surprise, and crossing to the lamp, read the name on it aloud:

"Major Strickland."

"The gentleman desires to see Miss Rivers on very particular business," said the man.

A slight sound caused them to turn their heads, and there stood Major Strickland, hat in hand, in the doorway. As he came forward the waiter went out and shut the door.

"Pardon this intrusion," said the Major, his eyes fixed intently on the startled girl; "have I the pleasure of addressing Miss Hermia Rivers?"

"That is my name, sir."

"Mine is on the card you are now holding. But from this hour I hope you will know me by another and a very different name. My dear young lady, in me you see your grandfather; in you I behold the daughter of my only son!"

CHAPTER XL.

A STORY OF THE PAST AND DEPARTURE.

HAD a bomb burst in the room it might have caused more alarm, but it could scarcely have been the cause of more astonishment than was the Major's sudden announcement.

It was half-an-hour later. The first access of wonder had in some measure subsided. There had been question and answer on both sides. The Major told how, in the first place, he had been struck by Hermia's extraordinary likeness to the miniature in his possession, and, in the second, by her surname (his son's full name had been Warren Rivers Strickland); and how, when he found that only that very day she had been to Broome to seek an interview with Miss Pengarvon, he had at once come to the conclusion that it was not possible that she could be anyone other than the granddaughter he had sought for so long a time, but had hitherto sought in vain.

Then came the Major's turn to be told the story of Hermia's adoption by John Brancker and his sister, followed by an account of Mr. Hodgson's visits to Ash-down, which naturally led up to the particulars of Clement's quest and what had resulted therefrom, the whole ending with an account of what had passed at the interview between Miss Pengarvon and Hermia only a few hours before.

But something more remained to be told, to wit, the story of the ill-fated young couple, Warren Strickland and Isabel Pengarvon. This the Major now proceeded to narrate as far as the facts connected therewith were known to him. The following summary of what he had to tell is all that need be given here :

At the time young Warren Strickland went down to Stavering for the purpose of trout-fishing, he had just

passed his final army examination and was awaiting his commission and appointment. While at Stavington he met Isabel Pengarvon, fell in love with her, and persuaded her to agree to a secret marriage. He was very poor, Isabel had not a farthing of her own, and on both sides the marriage was an act of the maddest imprudence. Young Strickland kept the affair a profound secret from all his friends and connections, and when he received his commission and was ordered to Aldershot, he established Isabel in lodgings in London, and ran up to see her there as often as he could get away. In those lodgings Hermia was born.

One day, when Isabel had been about a year married, a strange woman called upon her and announced herself as Warren Strickland's first wife, producing in proof of her claim what purported to be a certificate of marriage at a registrar's office, which anyone less ignorant of such matters than Isabel would at once have seen to be an impudent forgery. That Warren, when scarcely more than a boy—indeed, he was hardly more than that when he married—had been entangled in the toils of the woman, who was some half-dozen years his senior, and in a moment of infatuation had promised her marriage, there was little reason to doubt. Finding herself jilted, and Warren married to another, she had determined on the scheme of revenge described above. Unfortunately Isabel chose to believe the woman's tale, so plausibly was it told, and backed up by such apparent proofs; and without waiting to question Warren, she at once quitted her lodgings, taking her child with her, and leaving behind her a note in which she told her husband that she had left him for ever and the reason why, and begging of him, if he had any love for her still left, to make no attempt to find her.

It was not till three or four days after Isabel had gone that the blow fell. Warren had run up to town to bid his wife a hurried farewell. His regiment was ordered to India, where a frontier war had just broken

out, and he was due to embark at Portsmouth forty-eight hours later. For a few hours he was like a man bereft of reason ; then the necessity for immediate action of some kind forced him, in his own despite, to face the facts of the case with some degree of outward calmness. At length he decided to adopt the only course which seemed to hold out any prospect of success. To have himself set about any search for his wife with only a few hours at his command would have been the sheerest folly. Having contrived, by means best known to himself, to raise a hundred pounds, he went to a Private Inquiry Agent and placed the whole of the facts in his hands, giving the man an address in India to write to. Little as it seemed at the time, it was all he could do, and a few hours later he went aboard ship.

Whether the agent used his best endeavors to trace Isabel and failed in the attempt, or whether he quietly pocketed his fee and satisfied his conscience by making a few perfunctory but futile inquiries was a point as to which nothing was ever known, nor ever would be now, the man himself having died a few months later. In any case no communication from him ever reached Warren Strickland. As it fell out, however, the young soldier came by his death within a year after landing, having been mortally wounded in a skirmish with some of the hill tribes. He lived long enough to enable him to dictate a letter to his father—who was himself in India at the time, but a thousand miles away from where his son lay dying—in which he told him all about his marriage and the flight of Isabel ; making it his last request that on his father's return to England, he should use every endeavor to find his daughter-in-law and her child, and prove to Isabel how terribly mistaken she had been in acting as she had. With his letter the dying man enclosed his marriage certificate. For reasons which need not be detailed, Major Strickland had been precluded from doing anything towards

the fulfilment of his son's last wishes till a month or two before his first call on Miss Pengarvon.

"There is one question," said the Major, in conclusion, addressing himself directly to Hermia, "which I have refrained from asking till after I had told you all there is to tell, as far as I am concerned. It is about your mother, my dear. Is she still living? Is she —?" Something in the girl's face bade him pause.

"Not till yesterday did I know who my mother was, or anything about her," replied Hermia, in broken accents. "But she is dead—so I am now told. She died when I was only a few weeks old."

"Is that indeed so?" said the Major, with a sigh. "Then the hope of finding her, and of proving to her the utter falsity of the charge made by that vile woman against my poor boy must now be abandoned for ever. But had it not been for my endeavors to trace her, I should not have found you. For that, my dear child, I can never be sufficiently thankful. I have no one but you in the world, and already I feel that you are very dear to me."

They were sitting on the sofa side by side. The Major moved a little nearer to the girl, and taking her head gently between his hands, he drew it towards him and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Then Hermia's arms were wound round his neck, and with her cheek resting against his shoulder, her overcharged heart found its natural relief in tears. Aunt Charlotte rose, and beckoning to Clem, they left grandfather and granddaughter together.

The ladies had retired for the night, and the Major and Clem were sitting over a final weed.

"It seems to me," said the former, after they had smoked awhile in silence, "now my granddaughter and I have been brought together in a way so strange *and unexpected*, that we ought to make Miss Pengarvon acquainted with what has come to pass, and give her

one last opportunity of acknowledging her niece. If, after that, she still persists in the course she has hitherto followed, I do not think that either Hermia or I will care to trouble her in time to come. But what is your opinion, Dr. Hazeldine?"

It may here be remarked that the relation in which Clement and Hermia stood towards each other had been duly explained to Major Strickland in an "aside" by Aunt Charlotte, although he had probably guessed the truth by the time he had been ten minutes in their company; whereupon he had at once shaken hands heartily with Clem, and had declared laughingly, that he was sincerely glad to hear that the task of finding a husband for his granddaughter had been taken off his hands, and that the arrangement met with his entire approbation.

Doctor Hazeldine was quite of the Major's opinion, that a final appeal ought to be made to Miss Pengarvon. "It has seemed to me, when considering the matter," he went on to observe, "that possibly there may have been a doubt lurking in Miss Pengarvon's mind all these years, as to whether her sister was really married, in which case one can readily understand her determination to keep everything connected with the affair a profound secret. She comes of a stock which have always been known round about as 'the Proud Pengarvons,' and of which the family motto is, 'Pride I Cherish.' This seems to me a factor in the affair which ought not to be overlooked. May I ask whether you happen to have your son's marriage certificate by you?"

"It is in my portmanteau upstairs. I brought it with me, thinking that I might possibly be called upon to produce it."

"Then, if you will allow me to say so, why not take it with you to Broome to-morrow? In your place, I should insist on seeing Miss Pengarvon, and on laying the certificate before her as evidence which not even she can doubt or cavil at. If, after that, she should

still persist in maintaining her present attitude, I agree with you in thinking that nothing more can be done."

"What you urge is certainly worthy of a trial," said the Major, "and to-morrow shall see it put to the test."

Barney Dale had happened to mention that since her late attack Miss Pengarvon seldom rose before noon, so it was not till between four and five o'clock the following afternoon that Major Strickland, his granddaughter and Clement found themselves at Broome. Miss Brancker, feeling that she might perhaps be in the way, had stayed behind, and Clement would have followed her example had not the Major insisted on his accompanying them.

Earlier in the day, Clem had sent Barney a note by messenger, so that he was prepared for their arrival. This time they drove up to the front entrance, and, in response to the Major's summons, Barney flung open the massive oaken door, which since Sir Jasper's death had so rarely turned on its hinges to admit anyone.

"This young lady is my granddaughter and Miss Pengarvon's niece," said the Major. "We are about to leave Stavering in the course of a few hours, but are desirous of seeing Miss Pengarvon before doing so. Be good enough, please, to lead the way to her room, and announce our arrival to her."

At any other time Barney would have refused admittance to the Major until he had obtained his mistress's permission, but Clem in his note had told him the object of their visit—it was "all for Hermia's sake," he had written—so now he simply bowed and held wide the door for them to enter. Then having shut the door, he motioned to them to follow him, all without a word, and led the way to the Green Parlor. The Major and Hermia obeyed his mute directions, but Clement stayed behind in the entrance hall.

Barney—the Major and Hermia a little way behind *him*—knocked with his knuckles on the door of the *Green Parlor*, and bent his ear for the familiar sum-

mons to enter. But none came. Presently he knocked again, louder than before. Still no response. The only sound that broke the strained silence was the fluting of a blackbird somewhere outside the Hall. Then, after a scared look at the others, Barney opened the door and made one step forward into the room. Next moment a cry that was half a wail broke from the old man's lips; the Major, followed by Hermia, hurried into the room.

There, in her high-backed chair, with its empty fellow chair facing her on the opposite side of the table, with her glazed eyes staring straight before her, and a look of awe unutterable on her ashen-grey face, sat Miss Pengarvon, stone dead. On the table in front of her were scattered a number of yellow, time-faded letters, which she had apparently been engaged in looking over at the moment the Great Captain touched her suddenly on the shoulder, and beckoned her to follow him.

CHAPTER XLI.

"GOOD-BYE TO ONE AND ALL."

IMMEDIATELY ON the discovery of what had happened, Clement was summoned by the Major, who then conducted Hermia to another room. A brief examination sufficed to prove that Miss Pengarvon must have been dead a couple of hours at the least. When Doctor Bland arrived a little later he seemed in no way surprised. His patient had been suffering from heart disease for years, and in no case could a fatal termination have been much longer delayed.

At last Barney Dale's lips were unsealed; his mistress's death had absolved him from his oath. He was now as willing to tell all he knew as before he had been obstinately dumb. With what degree of interest his narrative was listened to may readily be imagined.

On that snowy December night, now more than.

twenty years ago, poor Isabel was all but dead when carried into the house by Barney and his wife. She never recovered consciousness, nor even as much as opened her eyes, but presently breathed three or four faint sighs and was gone. Her infant, lying warmly against its mother's bosom, had suffered but little harm. There was no wedding-ring on Isabel's finger, but one was found suspended by a ribbon round her neck. On the child's clothes a third name had been carefully erased, the words "Hermia Rivers" being alone left. Miss Pengarvon had at once leaped to the conclusion that her sister had not been married. It would never do to let the world know that the family honor of the "Proud Pengarvons" had been smirched. At any and every cost Isabel and her fault must be hidden away. Barney Dale had a nephew in Stavinger, a carpenter by trade; this man secretly made an oak coffin, and conveyed it to Broome after nightfall. Exactly below the Green Parlor, and hollowed out of the soft sandstone on which the Hall was built, was an underground room which had been used as a hiding-place in the old, bad days of religious intolerance and persecution, and was known as the "Priest's Chamber." Access to it was obtained by means of a narrow stairway in the thickness of the wall, hidden by a sliding panel behind the old bureau.

The secret of the Chamber had always been carefully confined to members of the family, and not even Barney had known of its existence until Miss Pengarvon revealed to him her design, which was to make it the last resting-place of her sister. Accordingly, in the dead of night, a portion of the flooring of the Green Parlor was taken up by Barney and his nephew, and the coffin and its inmate lowered into the vault below—Miss Letitia, on her knees, weeping and praying silently, while Miss Pengarvon stood by, frowning and dry-eyed. The flooring was then replaced, and a month later, Barney's nephew, who had long been desirous of emigrating, had

his passage to the States paid by Miss Pengarvon, and in addition, a sum of money given him to enable him to make a fair start in life when he got there.

Hermia was brought up by a sister of Barney, who lived at a distance, until she was three years old, at which age she passed into the keeping of John Brancker and his sister.

Next day Clement Hazeldine went back home and got into harness again without an hour's delay. Hermia, Miss Brancker, and the Major stayed at Broome over the funeral. It was a double funeral, for Miss Pengarvon and the sister whom living she had so cruelly treated were laid to rest in one grave. No will could be found ; neither, so far as could be ascertained, had Miss Pengarvon ever made one. Broome, and the two small farms pertaining to it, together with the accumulated savings of the two sisters during a long course of years, all devolved upon Hermia as next of kin. She was the last of the old race.

It was only natural that Edward Hazeldine's thoughts should turn again in the direction of Miss Winterton, now that Varrel, by his confession, had absolved the elder Mr. Hazeldine's memory of the charge of self-murder. The confession had been published in the newspapers, and the facts of the case were now known to the world at large. Sometimes Edward told himself that he would tempt fortune once again at the very first opportunity which should offer itself ; at other times he said to himself, " Although my father's memory has been cleared, nothing can do away with the fact that I proposed to Miss Winterton at a time when I had every reason to believe that he had committed suicide, trusting to her and the world's ignorance of that fact for the successful issue of my suit. How is it possible that she should ever forgive me ?"

Whether or no he would ever have summoned up

courage enough to urge his suit again may well be doubted, had not the lady herself, after a fashion which it would be futile for one of the opposite sex to attempt to describe, contrived to make him aware that his chance of success might not, perhaps, be quite so hopeless as in his more desponding moods he was inclined to believe it to be. In any case, he did propose, and was accepted.

It was not till some time after she had made him happy that he ventured to ask Miss Winterton for an explanation of one point which had always been a mystery to him, namely, by what means she had been led to believe that his father had committed suicide. Her explanation was a very simple one.

It has been mentioned that Ephraim Judd had two sisters, one of whom, at the time of his illness and death, was in service at Seaham Lodge, while the other, Eliza by name, was at home, waiting till she could obtain another situation. Eliza, who had a large measure of the curiosity which was so marked a trait of her brother's character, was penetrated by a strong desire to ascertain what it was Ephraim had to say to Doctor Hazeldine which no one else must be allowed to hear. Ephraim's room was divided from the next room by a pair of folding doors, behind which Eliza took up a position as listener, the next time Doctor Hazeldine called. She could not hear all that passed, but she heard what she took for a positive statement by her brother that Mr. Hazeldine's death was the result of his own act. Like Ephraim, she was close of tongue, and she spoke of what she had heard to no one but her sister. This sister was a favorite of Miss Winterton, filling among other duties, those of maid to her, and she it was who repeated the story Eliza had told her. As a consequence, Miss Winterton at once sent for Eliza, and then bound both the girls to secrecy; and, so far as was known, neither of them had broken the promise they had then given her. At the same time that Miss Win-

terton told all this to Edward, she led him to understand that, had he frankly confided to her when he first proposed what at that time he believed to be the truth about his father, her answer might have been a different one. It had been his secrecy in the matter, not the manner of his father's death, which, for the time being, had turned her against him.

To Frank Derison a few parting words are due.

As week by week his balance at the Ashdown Savings Bank kept on melting away, he vowed to himself, not once but a hundred times—generally when on his way home with empty pockets—that he would never cross the threshold of the "Bons Frères" again. But by the time next evening, or the evening after that, had come round, he was again under the influence of the fatal fascination, so that even while telling himself he would not go, his feet would lead him, almost as it seemed in his own despite, in the direction of the railway station; and when once he got as far as that he knew there was no going back for him. At length the day came when he drew his last sovereign out of the Bank, yet even then he lacked the strength of mind to put his foot down and say resolutely to himself: "Not a single step further will I advance on the pleasant but delusive path which has already led me to the brink of ruin." Instead of that, he began to borrow money here and there among his many friends and acquaintances, but chiefly from Mr. Howes. Mr. Howes was a bachelor, and a thrifty man to boot, and had a pleasant little banking-account of his own. He made no demur about lending Frank a few pounds now and again, being careful to take his I. O. U. in return. In all probability the young man would one day be taken into partnership, and Mr. Howes calculated that whatever sums he might now disburse in the way of loans would be repaid him many times over, if not in one form then in another, after that event should have come to pass. *It is to be said*

in his favor that, although he sometimes wondered why Frank stood in need of such frequent loans, he had not the remotest suspicion of the purpose to which the money was really put. Since Mr. Avison had spoken to him, Frank had to all seeming developed into one of the most sober and steady-going of Bank officials. As already stated, all his gambling was done at Dulminster.

But by this time the "Bons Frères" Club had acquired for itself a very unenviable reputation among the more staid circles of Dulminster society. More than one promising young man had ruined himself, or had been ruined by others—it came to the same thing in the end—in that cosy octagon room built out at the back of the Club, where so many pleasant fellows forgathered night after night. By-and-bye it began to be whispered about that the place was little better than a den of thieves. Thus it came to pass that one day an information was sworn against the Club by the father of a youngster who had come to grief within its walls, the consequence of which was that the same night the police made a raid on the premises, and not content with seizing the whole of the gambling plant, they marched everyone they found there to the police-station, where names and addresses were taken down, and a summons handed to each delinquent to appear next morning before the magistrates. Among those thus taken red-handed was Frank Derison. From that moment, as he knew full well, his career at the Bank was at an end. Such an escapade was one of those things which Mr. Avison was the last man in the world to overlook; indeed, Frank never went near him afterwards. Two days later, without saying a word to anyone, he took the train for London and enlisted.

This little affair of Frank's happened about a fortnight before Richard Varrel's confession was made public. When Mr. Avison read the confession in his morning paper, he saw the way open to him for an act

of reparation, which he had been longing for some time to carry into effect, but which his pride—in this instance, surely, a very foolish sort of pride—had hitherto kept him from doing. Now, however, he wrote a very gracious note to John Brancker, in which the latter was asked to call upon the Banker without delay. It will be sufficient to record the result of the meeting, which was that John was asked to accept the position of junior partner in the firm.

But little more remains to be told.

It was a great mortification to poor Mrs. Hazeldine, and one which it took her some time to recover from, to find that both Lady Glendoyle and the Hon. Mrs. Gore-Bandon, after calling twice upon her—their carriages and liveried servants waiting for them at the door meanwhile—dropped her as easily and quietly as they had taken her up. Whether their calls in the first instance had originated in a feeling of sympathy for her in her great affliction, not unmixed, it may be, with a hardly acknowledged wish to ascertain the particulars of the late tragedy at the fountain-head, or whether they discovered certain qualities in Mrs. Hazeldine which seemed to render it desirable that they should not cultivate her further, were points best known to themselves, and as to which they took nobody into their confidence. In any case, the fact remained the same—the widow saw them no more.

After a time—that is to say, when her husband had been dead about half a year—Mrs. Hazeldine, at Fanny's prompting and instigation, began to receive such of her friends and acquaintances as chose to favor her with their company to five o'clock tea. It was a species of mild dissipation, such as she would not have ventured upon during her husband's lifetime; but she was not long in discovering that it imparted a zest to existence undreamed of before.

Mrs. Hazeldine could not afford to keep a carriage, and being naturally indolent, she had a great distaste

for walking exercise, while she was one of those women who have a perpetual craving for society, and whose mental exigencies, so to call them, are not satisfied without an ample supply of gossip—not for the world would one call it scandal—and a knowledge of all that is happening within the limited round of their acquaintance, from the arrival of Mrs. A.'s latest baby to the appearance at church of Mrs. Z. in a new and ultra-fashionable bonnet.

As matters were now arranged, she could enjoy herself to her heart's content without the necessity of setting foot across her own threshold. To be expensively dressed—and mourning can be made very expensive, as some of us know to our cost—and to receive a constant succession of visitors in your own drawing-room, who are just as ready to tell you everything there is to tell—with, it may be, a few more or less fanciful additions of the narrator's own incorporated here and there—as you are to listen to it, and yet who neither put you to too much outlay in return, nor stay long enough to bore you—can anything be more delightful?

To Fanny Hazeldine the first three or four months after her father's death were the dreariest she had ever known. The dreadful nature of the tragedy which had overshadowed her own and her mother's life had the effect of intensifying their bereavement in the eyes of the world, and, for the time, of isolating them more completely than if Mr. Hazeldine's death had resulted from natural causes.

That Fanny doffed her "horrid crape" at the earliest possible date goes without saying. She was fully alive to the fact that the soft semi-tones of half-mourning became her admirably; and before long she began to plume herself for further conquests.

But, indeed, when she came once more to cast her eyes around, the prospect was a most disheartening one; for where is the use of a young Amazon donning her armor and going forth on conquest bent, when with

every year that passes it becomes a more difficult matter to find anyone on whom it is worth while to try one's prowess? And that such is becoming the case in Ashdown can no longer be denied. More and more the young men, while not yet out of their teens, take to turning their back on their provincial homes, going to fight the battle of life, and find wives for themselves elsewhere.

Well may Fanny Hazeldine, as one birthday comes treading on the heels of another, begin to feel a touch of despair. In years gone by she was an arrant flirt, having entered the lists at an early age, and in pure recklessness, and because she loved the game too well to bring it willingly to a close, spurned two or three really excellent offers. Now it seems as if the Fates are about to avenge themselves, as they have a way of doing, sooner or later, by allowing her—dreadful phrase!—to be "left on the shelf."

Hermia and Clement were married about three months after Miss Pengarvon's death, by which time Clement had succeeded to a great part of the practice of Doctor Finchdown, whom advancing years had compelled to retire. A tenant was found for Broome in the person of a wealthy manufacturer. Even had her husband been a man of independent means, instead of a hard-working country Doctor, Hermia would have shrunk from making the old house her home. It was associated in her mind with too many painful episodes in connection with her mother for her ever to have felt happy under its roof. At her wish, the entrance to the "Priest's Chamber" was bricked up, and the Green Parlor panelled afresh.

Barney Dale, liberally pensioned by Hermia, took up his abode with his niece and her husband. Twice a year he spends a week with Mr. and Mrs. Hazeldine at Ashdown, on which occasions the old man is made much of and petted to his heart's content.

Major Strickland, who is fond of his club, fluctuates

between London and Oaklands, which is the name of Doctor Hazeldine's new house, where his room is always kept in readiness for him, so that he can come and go as the whim takes him, which is just what he likes to do.

The latest news anent Edward Hazeldine is to the effect that he has at length definitely made up his mind to offer himself to the electors of Ashdown as a candidate at the next General Election. In this he is encouraged by his wife, who has her ambitions ; and as Lord Elstree, who has considerable influence in the borough, has promised to back him up in every legitimate way possible, there seems a fair chance of success for him, more especially in view of the fact that the present member has contrived to render himself thoroughly obnoxious to a large number of his supporters.

When, in due course, a son and heir made his appearance at Oaklands, at the christening Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte acted as sponsors for the child. When Master Hazeldine woke up in his cot after the christening guests had gone and made his voice heard in the land, his mother, on going to him, was surprised to find that his chubby fingers were firmly grasping a piece of paper. This, on being examined, was found to be a cheque for the twelve hundred and odd pounds about which we know something already. It was Uncle John and Aunt Charlotte's gift to their godson.

Should you chance to walk past Nairn Cottage almost any Friday evening between eight and ten o'clock, the strains of music proceeding therefrom will be pretty sure to greet your ears, for the old quartette parties have by no means been allowed to fall into disuetude. There, as of old, Mr. Kittaway's puckered face stares at you over his high cravat, what time, with an antiquated flourish of his bow arm, he evokes the resonant accents of his beloved 'cello, which at his bidding seems to do everything but speak. John with his flute, and Clement *with his fiddle*, play as if they had one soul between

them, while Hermia at the piano with deft fingers blends the whole into one rich, full, harmonious volume of sound. Dear Aunt Charlotte with a kitten on her lap and a piece of crewel-work in her hands, which, however, progresses but slowly, listens and looks on, placidly happy in the happiness of those she loves. Stretched at full length on the hearthrug may be seen a sturdy urchin intent on putting together a more than usually intricate puzzle picture, and thereby proving to all and sundry what a clever and important personage he is. But, as far as his mother and his Aunt Charlotte are concerned, no such proof is needed. They have been fully convinced of the fact long ago.

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